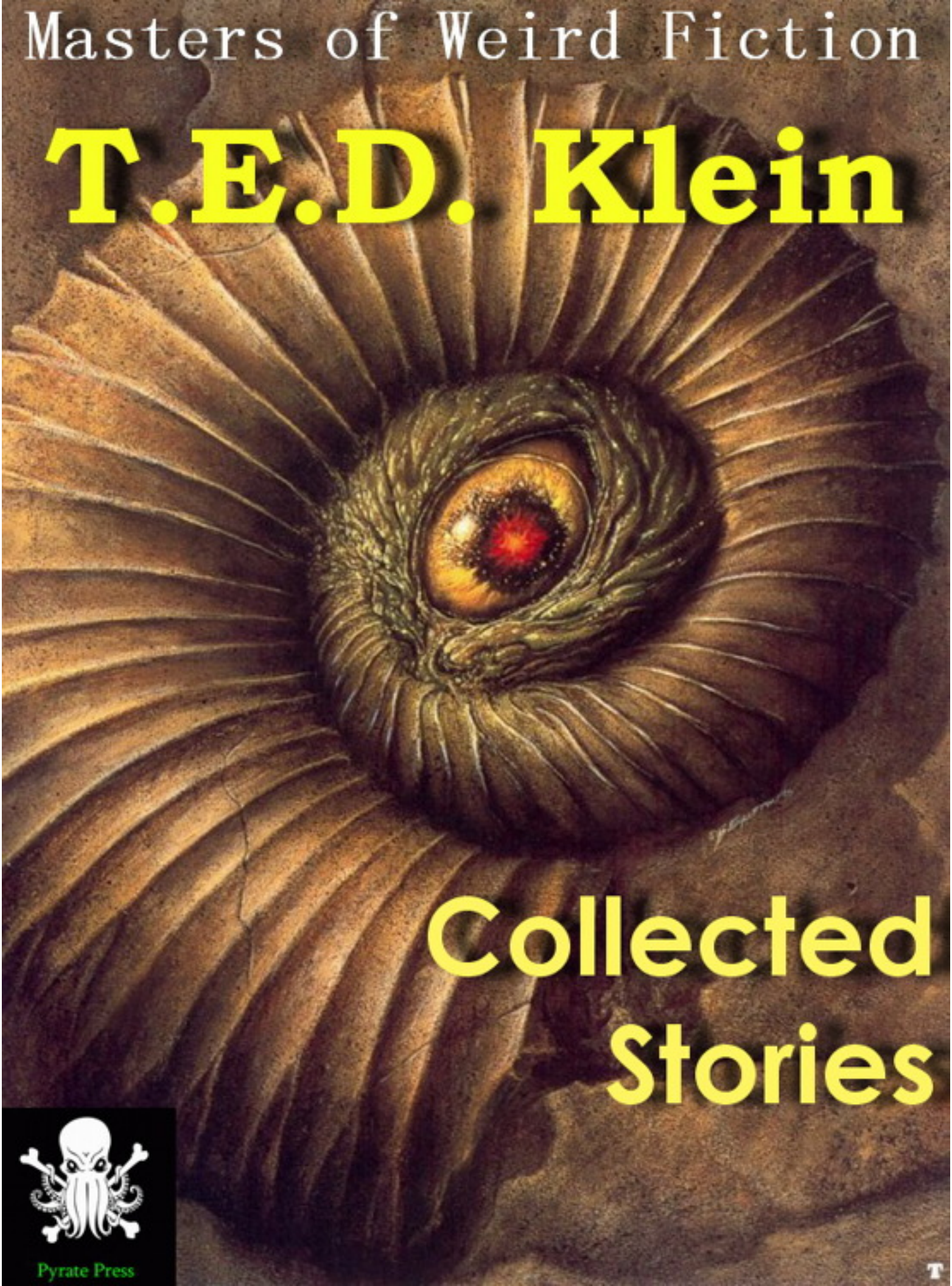
Masters of Weird Fiction

T.E.D. Klein



Collected Stories

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The Events At Poroth Farm

As soon as the phone stops ringing, I'll begin this affidavit. Lord, it's hot in here. Perhaps I should open a window…

Thirteen rings. It has a sense of humor.

I suppose that ought to be comforting.

Somehow I'm not comforted. If it feels free to indulge in these teasing, tormenting little games, so much the worse for me.

The summer is over now, but this room is like an oven. My shirt is already drenched, and this pen feels slippery in my hand. In a moment or two the little drop of sweat that's collecting above my eyebrow is going to splash onto this page.

Just the same, I'll keep that window closed. Outside, through the dusty panes of glass, I can see a boy in red spectacles sauntering toward the courthouse steps. Perhaps there's a telephone booth in back…

A sense of humor-that's one quality I never noticed in it. I saw only a deadly seriousness and, of course, an intelligence that grew at terrifying speed, malevolent and inhuman. If it now feels itself safe enough to toy with me before doing whatever it intends to do, so much the worse for me. So much the worse, perhaps, for us all.

I hope I'm wrong. Though my name is Jeremy, derived from Jeremiah, I'd hate to be a prophet in the wilderness. I'd much rather be a harmless crank.

But I believe we're in for trouble.

I'm a long way from the wilderness now, of course. Though perhaps not far enough to save me… I'm writing this affidavit in room 2-K of the Union Hotel, overlooking Main Street in Flemington, New Jersey, twenty miles south of Gilead. Directly across the street, hippies lounging on its steps,

stands the county courthouse where Bruno Hauptmann was tried back in 1935. (Did they ever find the body of that child?) Hauptmann undoubtedly walked down those very steps, now lined with teenagers savoring their last week of summer vacation. Where that boy in the red spectacles sits sucking on his cigarette-did the killer once halt there, police and reporters around him, and contemplate his imminent execution?

For several days now I have been afraid to leave this room.

I have perhaps been staring too often at that ordinary-looking boy on the steps. He sits there every day. The red spectacles conceal his eyes; it's impossible to tell where he's looking.

I know he's looking at me.

But it would be foolish of me to waste time worrying about executions when I have these notes to transcribe. It won't take long, and then, perhaps, I'll sneak outside to mail them-and leave New Jersey forever. I remain, despite all that's happened, an optimist. What was it my namesake said? "Thou art my hope in the day of evil."

There *is*, surprisingly, some real wilderness left in New Jersey, assuming one wants to be a prophet. The hills to the west, spreading from the southern swamplands to the Delaware and beyond to Pennsylvania, provide shelter for deer, pheasant, even an occasional bear-and hide hamlets never visited by outsiders: pockets of ignorance, some of them, citadels of ancient superstition utterly cut off from news of New York and the rest of the state, religious communities where customs haven't changed appreciably since the days of their settlement a century or more ago.

It seems incredible that villages so isolated can exist today on the very doorstep of the world's largest metropolis-villages with nothing to offer the outsider, and hence never visited, except by the occasional hunter who stumbles on them unwittingly. Yet as you speed down one of the state highways, consider how few of the cars slow down for the local roads. It is easy to pass the little towns without even a glance at the signs; and if there are no signs…? And consider, too, how seldom the local traffic turns off onto the narrow roads that emerge without warning from the woods. And

when those un-traveled side roads lead into others still deeper in wilderness; and when those in turn give way to dirt roads, deserted for weeks on end… It is not hard to see how tiny rural communities can exist less than an hour from major cities, virtually unaware of one another's existence.

Television, of course, will link the two-unless, as is often the case, the elders of the community choose to see this distraction as the Devil's tool and proscribe it. Telephones put these outcast settlements in touch with their neighbors-unless they choose to ignore their neighbors. And so in the course of years they are… forgotten.

New Yorkers were amazed when in the winter of 1968 the *Times* "discovered" a religious community near New Providence that had existed in its present form since the late 1800s-less than forty miles from Times Square. Agricultural work was performed entirely by hand, women still wore long dresses with high collars, and town worship was held every evening.

I, too, was amazed. I'd seldom traveled west of the Hudson and still thought of New Jersey as some dismal extension of the Newark slums, ruled by gangsters, foggy with swamp gases and industrial waste, a gray land that had surrendered to the city.

Only later did I learn of the rural New Jersey, and of towns whose solitary general stores double as post offices, with one or two gas pumps standing in front. And later still I learned of Baptistown and Quakertown, their old religions surviving unchanged, and of towns like Lebanon, Landsdown, and West Portal, close to Route 22 and civilization but heavy with secrets city folk never dreamed of: Mt. Airy, with its network of hidden caverns, and Mt. Olive, bordering the infamous Budd Lake; Middle Valley, sheltered by dark cliffs, subject of the recent archaeological debate chronicled in *Natural History*, where the wanderer may still find grotesque relics of pagan worship and, some say, may still hear the chants that echo from the cliffs on certain nights; and towns with names like Zion and Zaraphath and Gilead, forgotten communities of bearded men and black-robed women, walled hamlets too small or obscure for most maps of the state. This was the wilderness into which I traveled, weary of Manhattan's interminable din;

and it was outside Gilead where, until the tragedies, I chose to make my home for three months.

Among the silliest of literary conventions is the “town that won’t talk”-the Bavarian village where peasants turn away from tourists’ queries about “the castle” and silently cross themselves, the New England harbor town where fishermen feign ignorance and cast “furtive glances” at the traveler. In actuality, I have found, country people love to talk to the stranger, provided he shows a sincere interest in their anecdotes. Storekeepers will interrupt their activity at the cash register to tell you their theories on a recent murder; farmers will readily spin tales of buried bones and of a haunted house down the road. Rural townspeople are not so reticent as the writers would have us believe.

Gilead, isolated though it is behind its oak forests and ruined walls, is no exception. The inhabitants regard all outsiders with an initial suspicion, but let one demonstrate a respect for their traditional reserve and they will prove friendly enough. They don’t favor modern fashions or flashy automobiles, but they can hardly be described as hostile, although that was my original impression.

When asked about the terrible events at Poroth Farm, they will prove more than willing to talk. They will tell you of bad crops and polluted well water, of emotional depression leading to a fatal argument. In short, they will describe a conventional rural murder, and will even volunteer their opinions on the killer’s present whereabouts.

But you will learn almost nothing from them-or almost nothing that is true. They don’t know what really happened. I do. I was there.

I had come to spend the summer with Sarr Poroth and his wife. I needed a place where I could do a lot of reading without distraction, and Poroth’s farm, secluded as it was even from the village of Gilead six miles down the dirt road, appeared the perfect spot for my studies.

I had seen the Poroths’ advertisement in the *Hunterdon County Democrat* on a trip west through Princeton last spring. They advertised for a summer or long-term tenant to live in one of the outbuildings behind the farmhouse.

As I soon learned, the building was a long low cinderblock affair, unpleasantly suggestive of army barracks but clean, new, and cool in the sun; by the start of summer ivy sprouted from the walls and disguised the ugly gray brick. Originally intended to house chickens, it had in fact remained empty for several years until the farm's original owner, a Mr. Baber, sold out last fall to the Poroths, who immediately saw that with the installation of dividing walls, linoleum floors, and other improvements the building might serve as a source of income. I was to be their first tenant.

The Poroths, Sarr and Deborah, were in their early thirties, only slightly older than I, although anyone who met them might have believed the age difference to be greater; their relative solemnity and the drabness of their clothing added years to their appearance, and so did their hair styles: Deborah, though possessing a beautiful length of black hair, wound it all in a tight bun behind her neck, pulling the hair back from her face with a severity which looked almost painful, and Sarr maintained a thin fringe of black beard that circled from ears to chin in the manner of the Pennsylvania Dutch, who leave their hair shaggy but refuse to grow moustaches lest they resemble the military class they've traditionally despised. Both man and wife were hardworking, grave of expression, and pale despite the time spent laboring in the sun-a pallor accentuated by the inky blackness of their hair. I imagine this unhealthy aspect was due, in part, to the considerable amount of inbreeding that went on in the area, the Poroths themselves being, I believe, third cousins. On first meeting, one might have taken them for brother and sister, two gravely devout children aged in the wilderness.

And yet there was a difference between them-and, too, a difference that set them both in contrast to others of their sect. The Poroths were, as far as I could determine, members of a tiny Mennonitic order outwardly related to the Amish, though doctrinal differences were apparently rather profound. It was this order that made up the large part of the community known as Gilead.

I sometimes think the only reason they allowed an infidel like me to live on their property (for my religion was among the first things they inquired about) was because of my name; Sarr was very partial to Jeremiah, and the

motto of his order was, “Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein.” (VI:16)

Having been raised in no particular religion except a universal skepticism, I began the summer with a hesitancy to bring up the topic in conversation, and so I learned comparatively little about the Poroths’ beliefs. Only toward the end of my stay did I begin to thumb through the Bible in odd moments and take to quoting jeremiads. That was, I suppose, Sarr’s influence.

I was able to learn, nonetheless, that for all their conservative aura the Poroths were considered, in effect, young liberals by most of Gilead. Sarr had a bachelor’s degree in religious studies from Rutgers, and Deborah had attended a nearby community college for two years, unusual for women of the sect. Too, they had only recently taken to farming, having spent the first year of their marriage near New Brunswick, where Sarr had hoped to find a teaching position and, when the job situation proved hopeless, had worked as a sort of handyman/ carpenter. While most inhabitants of Gilead had never left the farm, the Poroths were coming to it late-their families had been merchants for several generations-and so were relatively inexperienced.

The inexperience showed. The farm comprised some ninety acres, but most of that was forest, or fields of weeds too thick and high to walk through. Across the back yard, close to my rooms, ran a small, nameless stream nearly choked with green scum. A large cornfield to the north lay fallow, but Sarr was planning to seed it this year, using borrowed equipment. His wife spent much of her time indoors, for though she maintained a small vegetable garden, she preferred keeping house and looking after the Poroths’ great love, their seven cats.

As if to symbolize their broad-mindedness, the Poroths owned a television set, very rare in Gilead; in light of what was to come, however, it is unfortunate they lacked a telephone. (Apparently the set had been received as a wedding present from Deborah’s parents, but the monthly expense of a telephone was simply too great.) Otherwise, though, the little farmhouse was “modern” in that it had a working bathroom and gas heat. That they had advertised in the local newspaper was considered scandalous by some of the order’s more orthodox members, and indeed a mere subscription to

that innocuous weekly had at one time been regarded as a breach of religious conduct.

Though outwardly similar, both of them tall and pale, the Poroths were actually so different as to embody the maxim that “opposites attract.” It was that carefully nurtured reserve that deceived one at first meeting, for in truth Deborah was far more talkative, friendly, and energetic than her husband. Sarr was moody, distant, silent most of the time, with a voice so low that one had trouble following him in conversation. Sitting as stonily as one of his cats, never moving, never speaking, perennially inscrutable, he tended to frighten visitors to the farm until they learned that he was not really sitting in judgment on them; his reserve was not born of surliness but of shyness.

Where Sarr was catlike, his wife hid beneath the formality of her order the bubbly personality of a kitten. Given the smallest encouragement-say, a family visit-she would plunge into animated conversation, gesticulating, laughing easily, hugging whatever cat was nearby or shouting to guests across the room. When drinking-for both of them enjoyed liquor and, curiously, it was not forbidden by their faith-their innate differences were magnified: Deborah would forget the restraints placed upon women in the order and would eventually dominate the conversation, while her husband would seem to grow increasingly withdrawn and morose.

Women in the region tended to be submissive to the men, and certainly the important decisions in the Poroths’ lives were made by Sarr. Yet I really cannot say who was the stronger of the two. Only once did I ever see them quarrel…

Perhaps the best way to tell it is by setting down portions of the journal I kept this summer. Not every entry, of course. Mere excerpts. Just enough to make this affidavit comprehensible to anyone unfamiliar with the incidents at Poroth Farm.

The journal was the only writing I did all summer; my primary reason for keeping it was to record the books I’d read each day, as well as to examine my reactions to relative solitude over a long period of time. All the rest of my energies (as you will no doubt gather from the notes below) were spent

reading, in preparation for a course I plan to teach at Trenton State this fall. Or *planned*, I should say, because I don't expect to be anywhere around here come fall.

Where will I be? Perhaps that depends on what's beneath those rose-tinted spectacles.

The course was to cover the Gothic tradition from Shakespeare to Faulkner, from *Hamlet* to *Absalom, Absalom!* (And why not view the former as Gothic, with its ghost on the battlements and concern for lost inheritance?) To make the move to Gilead, I'd rented a car for a few days and had stuffed it full of books-only a few of which I ever got to read. But then, I couldn't have known…

How pleasant things were, at the beginning.

June 4

Unpacking day. Spent all morning putting up screens, and a good thing I did. Night now, and a million moths tapping at the windows. One of them as big as a small bird-white-largest I've ever seen. What kind of caterpillar must it have been? I hope the damned things don't push through the screens.

Had to kill literally hundreds of spiders before moving my stuff in. The Poroths finished doing the inside of this building only a couple of months ago, and already it's infested. Arachnidae-hate the bastards. Why? We'll take that one up with Sigmund someday. Daydreams of Revenge of the Spiders. Writhing body covered with a frenzy of hairy brown legs. "Egad, man, that face! That bloody, torn face! And the missing eyes! It looks like-no! Jeremy!" Killing spiders is supposed to bring bad luck. (Insidious Sierra Club propaganda masquerading as folk myth?) But can't sleep if there's anything crawling around… so what the hell?

Supper with the Poroths. Began to eat, then heard Sarr saying grace. Apologies-but things like that don't embarrass me as much as they used to. (Is that because I'm nearing thirty?)

Chatted about crops, insects, humidity. (Very damp area-band of purplish mildew already around bottom of walls out here.) Sarr told of plans to someday build a larger house when Deborah has a baby, three or four years from now. He wants to build it out of stone. Then he shut up, and I had to keep the conversation going. (Hate eating in silence-animal sounds of mastication, bubbling stomachs.) Deborah joked about cats being her surrogate children. All seven of them hanging around my legs, rubbing against ankles. My nose began running and my eyes itched. Goddamned allergy. Must remember to start treatments this fall, when I get to Trenton. Deborah sympathetic, Sarr merely watching; she told me my eyes were blood-shot, offered antihistamine. Told them I was glad they at least believe in modern medicine-I'd been afraid she'd offer herbs or mud or something. Sarr said some of the locals still use "snake oil." Asked him how snakes were killed, quoting line from *Vathek*: "The oil of the serpents I have pinched to death will be a pretty present." We discussed wisdom of pinching snakes. Apparently there's a copperhead out back, near the brook…

The meal was good-lamb and noodles. Not bad for fifteen dollars a week, since I detest cooking. Spice cake for dessert, home-made, of course. Deborah is a good cook. Handsome woman, too.

Still light when I left their kitchen. Fireflies already on the lawn-I've never seen so many. Knelt and watched them a while, listening to the crickets. Think I'll like it here.

Took nearly an hour to arrange my books the way I wanted them. Alphabetical order by authors? No, chronological… But anthologies mess that system up, so back to authors. Why am I so neurotic about my books?

Anyway, they look nice there on the shelves.

Sat up tonight finishing *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Figure it's best to get the long ones out of the way first. Radcliffe's unfortunate penchant for explaining away all her ghosts and apparitions really a mistake and a bore. All in all, not exactly the most fascinating reading, though a good study in Romanticism. Montoni the typical Byronic hero/villain. But can't demand students read *Udolpho*-too long. In fact, had to keep reminding myself to

slow down, have patience with the book. Tried to put myself in frame of mind of 1794 reader with plenty of time on his hands. It works, too-I do have plenty of time out here, and already I can feel myself beginning to unwind. What New York does to people…

It's almost two a.m. now, and I'm about ready to turn in. Too bad there's no bathroom in this building-I hate pissing outside at night. God knows what's crawling up your ankles… But it's hardly worth stumbling through the darkness to the farmhouse, and maybe waking up Sarr and Deborah. The nights out here are really pitch-black.

… Felt vulnerable, standing there against the night. But what made me even uneasier was the view I got of this building. The lamp on the desk casts the only light for miles, and as I stood outside looking into this room, I could see dozens of flying shapes making right for the screens. When you're inside here it's as if you're in a display case-the whole night can see you, but all you can see is darkness. I wish this room didn't have windows on three of the walls-though that does let in the breeze. And I wish the woods weren't so close to my windows by the bed. I suppose privacy is what I wanted-but feel a little unprotected out here.

Those moths are still batting themselves against the screens, but as far as I can see the only things that have gotten in are a few gnats flying around this lamp. The crickets sound good-you sure don't hear them in the city. Frogs are croaking in the brook.

My nose is only now beginning to clear up. Those goddamned cats. Must remember to buy some Contac. Even though the cats are all outside during the day, that farmhouse is full of their scent. But I don't expect to be spending that much time inside the house anyway; this allergy will keep me away from the TV and out here with the books.

Just saw an unpleasantly large spider scurry across the floor near the foot of my bed. Vanished behind the footlocker. Must remember to buy some insect spray tomorrow.

June 11

Hot today, but at night comes a chill. The dampness of this place seems to magnify temperature. Sat outside most of the day finishing the Maturin book, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, and feeling vaguely guilty each time I heard Sarr or Deborah working out there in the field. Well, I've paid for my reading time, so I guess I'm entitled to enjoy it. Though some of these old Gothics are a bit hard to enjoy. The trouble with *Melmoth* is that it wants you to hate. You're especially supposed to hate the Catholics. No doubt its picture of the Inquisition is accurate, but all a book like this can do is put you in an unconstructive rage. Those vicious characters have been dead for centuries, and there's no way to punish them. Still, it's a nice, cynical book for those who like atrocity scenes-starving prisoners forced to eat their girl-friends, delightful things like that. And narratives within narratives within narratives within narratives. I may assign some sections to my class…

Just before dinner, in need of a break, read a story by Arthur Machen. Welsh writer, turn of the century, though think the story's set somewhere in England: old house in the hills, dark woods with secret paths and hidden streams. God, what an experience! I was a little confused by the framing device and all its high-flown talk of "cosmic evil," but the sections from the young girl's notebook were… staggering. That air of paganism, the malevolent little faces peeping from the shadows, and those rites she can't dare talk about… It's called *"The White People,"* and it must be the most persuasive horror tale ever written.

Afterward, strolling toward the house, I was moved to climb the old tree in the side yard-the Poroths had already gone in to get dinner ready-and stood upright on a great heavy branch near the middle, making strange gestures and faces that no one could see. Can't see exactly what it was I did, or why. It was getting dark-fireflies below me and a mist rising off the field. I must have looked like a madman's shadow as I made signs to the woods and the moon.

Lamb tonight, and damned good. I may find myself getting fat. Offered, again, to wash the dishes, but apparently Deborah feels that's her role, and I don't care to dissuade her. So talked a while with Sarr about his cats-the usual subject of conversation, especially because, now that summer's

coming, they're bringing in dead things every night. Field mice, moles, shrews, birds, even a little garter snake. They don't eat them, just lay them out on the porch for the Poroths to see-sort of an offering, I guess. Sarr tosses the bodies in the garbage can, which, as a result, smells indescribably foul. Deborah wants to put bells around their necks; she hates mice but feels sorry for the birds. When she finished the dishes, she and Sarr sat down to watch one of their godawful TV programs, so I came out here to read.

Spent the usual ten minutes going over this room, spray can in hand, looking for spiders to kill. Found a couple of little ones, then spent some time spraying bugs that were hanging on the screens hoping to get in. Watched a lot of daddy longlegs curl up and die… Tended not to kill the moths, unless they were making too much of a racket banging against the screen; I can tolerate them okay, but it's only fireflies I really like. I always feel a little sorry when I kill one by mistake and see it hold that cold glow too long. (That's how you know they're dead: the dead ones don't wink. They just keep their light on till it fades away.)

The insecticide I'm using is made right here in New Jersey, by the Ortho Chemical Company. The label on the can says,

"WARNING. For Outdoor Use Only." That's why I bought it-figured it's the most powerful brand available.

Sat in bed reading Algernon Blackwood's witch/cat story, *"Ancient Sorceries"* (nowhere near as good as Machen, or as his own tale *"The Willows"*), and it made me think of those seven cats. The Poroths have around a dozen names for each one of them, which seems a little ridiculous since the creatures barely respond to even one name. Sasha, for example, the orange one, is also known as Butch, which comes from Bouche, mouth. And that's short for Eddie La Bouche, so he's also called Ed or Eddie-which in turn comes from some friend's mispronunciation of the cat's original name, Itty, short for Itty Bitty Kitty, which, apparently, he once was. And Zoë, the cutest of the kittens, is also called Bozo and Bisbo. Let's see, how many others can I remember? (I'm just learning to tell some of them apart.) Felix, or "Flixie," was originally called Paleface, and Phaedra, his mother, is sometimes known as Phuddy, short for Phuddy Duddy.

Come to think of it, the only cat that hasn't got multiple names is Bwada, Sarr's cat. (All the others were acquired after he married Deborah, but Bwada was his pet years before.) She's the oldest of the cats, and the meanest. Fat and sleek, with fine gray fur darker than silver gray, lighter than charcoal. She's the only cat that's ever bitten anyone-Deborah, as well as friends of the Poroths-and after seeing the way she snarls at the other cats when they get in her way, I decided to keep my distance. Fortunately she's scared of me and retreats whenever I approach. I think being spayed is what's messed her up and given her an evil disposition.

Sounds are drifting from the farmhouse. I can vaguely make out a psalm of some kind. It's late, past eleven, and I guess the Poroths have turned off the TV and are singing their evening devotions…

And now all is silence. They've gone to bed. I'm not very tired yet, so I guess I'll stay up a while and read some—

Something odd just happened. I've never heard anything like it. While writing for the past half hour I've been aware, if half-consciously, of the crickets. Their regular chirping can be pretty soothing, like the sound of a well-tuned machine. But just a few seconds ago they seemed to miss a beat. They'd been singing along steadily, ever since the moon came up, and all of a sudden they just stopped for a beat-and then they began again, only they were out of rhythm for a moment or two, as if a hand had jarred the record or there'd been some kind of momentary break in the natural flow…

They sound normal enough now, though. Think I'll go back to *Otranto* and let that put me to sleep. It may be the foundation of the English Gothics, but I can't imagine anyone actually reading it for pleasure. I wonder how many pages I'll be able to get through before I drop off…

June 12

Slept late this morning, and then, disinclined to read Walpole on such a sunny day, took a walk. Followed the little brook that runs past my building. There's still a lot of that greenish scum clogging one part of it, and if we don't have some rain soon I expect it will get worse. But the water

clears up considerably when it runs past the cornfield and through the woods.

Passed Sarr out in the field-he yelled to watch out for the copperhead, which put a pall on my enthusiasm for exploration… But as it happened I never ran into any snakes, and have a fair idea I'd survive even if bitten. Walked around half a mile into the woods, branches snapping in my face. Made an effort to avoid walking into the little yellow caterpillars that hang from every tree. At one point I had to get my feet wet, because the trail that runs alongside the brook disappeared and the undergrowth was thick. Ducked under a low arch made by decaying branches and vines, my sneakers sloshing in the water. Found that as the brook runs west it forms a small circular pool with banks of wet sand, surrounded by tall oaks, their roots thrust into the water. Lots of animal tracks in the sand-deer, I believe, and what may be a fox or perhaps some farmer's dog. Obviously a watering place. Waded into the center of the pool-it only came up a little past my ankles-but didn't stand there long because it started looking like rain.

The weather remained nasty all day, but no rain has come yet. Cloudy now, though; can't see any stars.

Finished *Otranto,* began *The Monk*. So far so good-rather dirty, really. Not for today, of course, but I can imagine the sensation it must have caused back at the end of the eighteenth century.

Had a good time at dinner tonight, since Sarr had walked into town and brought back some wine. (Medical note: I seem to be less allergic to cats when mildly intoxicated.) We sat around the kitchen afterward playing poker for matchsticks-very sinful indulgence, I understand; Sarr and Deborah told me, quite seriously, that they'd have to say some extra prayers tonight by way of apology to the Lord.

Theological considerations aside, though, we all had a good time and Deborah managed to clean us both out. Women's intuition, she says. I'm sure she must have it-she's the type. Enjoy being around her, and not always so happy to trek back outside, through the high grass, the night dew, the things in the soil… I've got to remember, though, that they're a couple, I'm the single one, and I mustn't intrude too long. So left them tonight at

eleven-or actually a little after that, since their clock is slightly out of kilter. They have this huge grandfather-type clock, a wedding present from Sarr's parents, that has supposedly been keeping perfect time for a century or more. You can hear its ticking all over the house when everything else is still. Deborah said that last night, just as they were going to bed, the clock seemed to slow down a little, then gave a couple of faster beats and started in as before. Sarr, who's pretty good with mechanical things, examined it, but said he saw nothing wrong. Well, I guess everything's got to wear out a bit, after years and years.

Back to *The Monk*. May Brother Ambrosio bring me pleasant dreams.

June 13

Read a little in the morning, loafed during the afternoon. At 4:30 watched *The Thief of Baghdad*-ruined on TV and portions omitted, but still a great film. Deborah puttered around the kitchen, and Sarr spent most of the day outside. Before dinner I went out back with a scissors and cut away a lot of ivy that has tried to grow through the windows of my building. The little shoots fasten onto the screens and really cling.

Beef with rice tonight, and apple pie for dessert. Great. I stayed inside the house after dinner to watch the late news with the Poroths. The announcer mentioned that today was Friday the thirteenth, and I nearly gasped. I'd known, on some dim automatic level, that it was the thirteenth, if only from keeping this journal; but I hadn't had the faintest idea it was Friday. That's how much I've lost track of time out here; day drifts into day, and every one but Sunday seems completely interchangeable. Not a bad feeling, really, though at certain moments this isolation makes me feel somewhat adrift. I'd been so used to living by the clock and the calendar…

We tried to figure out if anything unlucky happened to any of us today. About the only incident we could come up with was Sarr's getting bitten by some animal a cat had left on the porch. The cats had been sitting by the front door waiting to be let in for their dinner, and when Sarr came in from the field he was greeted with the usual assortment of dead mice and moles. As he always did, he began gingerly picking the bodies up by the tails and tossing them into the garbage can, meanwhile scolding the cats for being

such natural-born killers. There was one body, he told us, that looked different from the others he'd seen: rather like a large shrew, only the mouth was somehow askew, almost as if it were vertical instead of horizontal, with a row of little yellow teeth exposed. He figured that, whatever it was, the cats had pretty well mauled it, which probably accounted for its unusual appearance; it was quite tattered and bloody by this time.

In any case, he'd bent down to pick it up, and the thing had bitten him on the thumb. Apparently it had just been feigning death, like an opossum, because as soon as he yelled and dropped it the thing sped off into the grass, with Bwada and the rest in hot pursuit. Deborah had been afraid of rabies-always a real danger around here, rare though it is-but apparently the bite hadn't even pierced the skin. Just a nip, really. Hardly a Friday-the-thirteenth tragedy.

Lying in bed now, listening to sounds in the woods. The trees come really close to my windows on one side, and there's always some kind of sound coming from the underbrush in addition to the tapping at the screens. A million creatures out there, after all-most of them insects and spiders, a colony of frogs in the swampy part of the woods, and perhaps even skunks and raccoons. Depending on your mood, you can either ignore the sounds and just go to sleep or-as I'm doing now-remain awake listening to them. When I lie here thinking about what's out there, I feel more protected with the light off. So I guess I'll put away this writing…

June 15

Something really weird happened today. I still keep trying to figure it out.

Sarr and Deborah were gone almost all day; Sunday worship is, I guess, the center of their religious activity. They walked into Gilead early in the morning and didn't return until after four. They'd left, in fact, before I woke up. Last night they'd asked me if I'd like to come along, but I got the impression they'd invited me mainly to be polite, so I declined. I wouldn't want to make them uncomfortable during services, but perhaps someday I'll accompany them anyway, since I'm curious to see a fundamentalist church in action.

In any case, I was left to share the farm with the Poroths' seven cats and the four hens they'd bought last week. From my window I could see Bwada and Phaedra chasing after something near the barn; lately they'd taken to stalking grasshoppers. As I do every morning, I went into the farmhouse kitchen and made myself some breakfast, leafing through one of the Poroths' religious magazines, and then returned to my rooms out back for some serious reading. I picked up *Dracula* again, which I'd started yesterday, but the soppy Victorian sentimentality began to annoy me; the book had begun so well, on such a frightening note-Jonathan Harker trapped in that Carpathian castle, inevitably the prey of its terrible owner-that when Stoker switched the locale to England and his main characters to women, he simply couldn't sustain that initial tension.

With the Poroths gone I felt a little lonely and bored, something I hadn't felt out here yet. Though I'd brought shelves of books to entertain me, I felt restless and wished I owned a car; I'd have gone for a drive, perhaps visited friends at Princeton. As things stood, though, I had nothing to do except watch television or take a walk.

I followed the stream again into the woods and eventually came to the circular pool. There were some new animal tracks in the wet sand, and, ringed by oaks, the place was very beautiful, but still I felt bored. Again I waded into the center of the water and looked up at the sky through the trees. Feeling myself alone, I began to make some of the odd signs with face and hands that I had that evening in the tree-but I felt that these movements had been unaccountably robbed of their power. Standing there up to my ankles in water, I felt foolish.

Worse than that, upon leaving it I found a red-brown leech clinging to my right ankle. It wasn't large and I was able to scrape it off with a stone, but it left me with a little round bite that oozed blood, and a feeling of-how shall I put it?-physical helplessness. I felt that the woods had somehow become hostile to me and, more important, would forever remain hostile. Something had passed.

I followed the stream back to the farm, and there I found Bwada, lying on her side near some rocks along its bank. Her legs were stretched out as if

she were running, and her eyes were wide and astonished-looking. Flies were crawling over them.

She couldn't have been dead for long, since I'd see her only a few hours before, but she was already stiff. There was foam around her jaws. I couldn't tell what had happened to her until I turned her over with a stick and saw, on the side that had lain against the ground, a gaping red hole that opened like some new orifice. The skin around it was folded back in little triangular flaps, exposing the pink flesh beneath. I backed off in disgust, but I could see even from several feet away that the hole had been made *from the inside.*

I can't say that I was very upset at Bwada's death, because I'd always hated her. What did upset me, though, was the manner of it-I can't figure out what could have done that to her. I vaguely remember reading about a kind of slug that, when eaten by a bird, will bore its way out through the bird's stomach… But I'd never heard of something like this happening with a cat. And far stranger than that, how could-Well, anyway, I saw the body and thought, Good riddance. But I didn't know what to do with it. Looking back, of course, I wish I'd buried it right there… But I didn't want to go near it again. I considered walking into town and trying to find the Poroths, because I knew their cats were like children to them, even Bwada, and that they'd want to know right away. But I really didn't feel like running around Gilead asking strange people where the Poroths were-or, worse yet, stumbling into their forbidding-looking church in the middle of a ceremony.

Finally I made up my mind to simply leave the body there and pretend I'd never seen it. Let Sarr discover it himself. I didn't want to have to tell him when he got home that his pet had been killed; I prefer to avoid unpleasantness. Besides, I felt strangely guilty, the way one often does after someone else's misfortune.

So I spent the rest of the afternoon reading in my room, slogging through the Stoker. I wasn't in the best mood to concentrate. Sarr and Deborah got back after four-they shouted hello and went into the house. When Deborah called me for dinner, they still hadn't come outside.

All the cats except Bwada were inside having their evening meal when I entered the kitchen, and Sarr asked me if I'd seen her during the day. I lied and said I hadn't. Deborah suggested that occasionally Bwada ignored the supper call because, unlike the other cats, she sometimes ate what she killed and might simply be full. That rattled me a bit, but I had to stick to my lie.

Sarr seemed more concerned than Deborah, and when he told her he intended to search for the cat after dinner (it would still be light), I readily offered my help. I figured I could lead him to the spot where the body lay…

And then, in the middle of our dinner, came that scratching at the door. Sarr got up and opened it. Bwada walked in.

Now I knew she was dead. She was *stiff* dead. That wound in her side had been huge, and now it was only… a reddish swelling. Hairless. Luckily the Poroths didn't notice my shock; they were busy fussing over her, seeing what was wrong. "Look, she's hurt herself," said Deborah. "She's bumped into something." The animal didn't walk well, and there was a clumsiness in the way she held herself. When Sarr put her down after examining the swelling, she slipped when she tried to walk away.

The Poroths concluded that she had run into a rock or some other object and had badly bruised herself; they believe her lack of coordination is due to the shock, or perhaps to a pinching of the nerves. That sounds logical enough. Sarr told me before I came out here for the night that if she's worse tomorrow, he'll take her to the local vet, even though he'll have trouble paying for treatment. I immediately offered to lend him money, or even pay for the visit myself, because I desperately wanted to hear a doctor's opinion.

My own conclusion is really not that different from Sarr's. I tend to think now that maybe, just maybe, I was wrong in thinking the cat dead. Maybe what I mistook for rigor mortis was some kind of fit-after all, I know almost nothing about medicine. Maybe she really did run into something sharp, and then went into some kind of shock… whose effect hasn't yet worn off. Is this possible?

But I could swear that hole came from inside her.

I couldn't continue dinner and told the Poroths my stomach hurt, which was partly true. We all watched Bwada stumble around the kitchen floor, ignoring the food Deborah put before her as if it weren't there. Her movements were stiff, tentative, like a newborn animal still unsure how to move its muscles. I guess that's the result of her fit.

When I left the house tonight, a little while ago, she was huddled in the corner staring at me. Deborah was crooning over her, but the cat was staring at me.

Killed a monster of a spider behind my suitcase tonight. That Ortho spray really does a job. When Sarr was in here a few days ago he said the room smelled of spray, but I guess my allergy's too bad for me to smell it.

I enjoy watching the zoo outside my screens. Put my face close and stare the bugs eye to eye. Zap the ones whose faces I don't like with my spray can.

Tried to read more of the Stoker-but one thing keeps bothering me. The way that cat stared at me. Deborah was brushing its back, Sarr fiddling with his pipe, and that cat just stared at me and never blinked. I stared back, said, "Hey, Sarr? Look at Bwada. That damned cat's not blinking." And just as he looked up, it blinked. Heavily.

Hope we can go to the vet tomorrow, because I want to ask him whether cats can impale themselves on a rock or a stick, and if such an accident might cause a fit of some kind that would make them rigid.

Cold night. Sheets are damp and the blanket itches. Wind from the woods-ought to feel good in the summer, but it doesn't feel like summer. That damned cat didn't blink till I mentioned it. Almost as if it understood me.

June 17

… Swelling on her side's all healed now. Hair growing back over it. She walks fine, has a great appetite, shows affection to the Poroths. Sarr says her recovery demonstrates how the Lord watches over animals-affirms his

faith. Says if he'd taken her to a vet he'd just have been throwing away money.

Read some LeFanu. *"Green Tea,"* about the phantom monkey with eyes that glow, and *"The Familiar,"* about the little staring man who drives the hero mad. Not the smartest choices right now, the way I feel, because for all the time that fat gray cat purrs over the Poroths, it just stares at me. And snarls. I suppose the accident may have addled its brain a bit. I mean, if spaying can change a cat's personality, certainly a goring on a rock might.

Spent a lot of time in the sun today. The flies made it pretty hard to concentrate on the stories, but figured I'd get a suntan. I probably have a good tan now (hard to tell, because the mirror in here is small and the light dim), but suddenly it occurs to me that I'm not going to be seeing anyone for a long time anyway, except the Poroths, so what the hell do I care how I look?

Can hear them singing their nightly prayers now. A rather comforting sound, I must admit, even if I can't share the sentiments.

Petting Felix today-my favorite of the cats, real charm-came away with a tick on my arm which I didn't discover till taking a shower before dinner. As a result, I can still feel imaginary ticks crawling up and down my back. Damned cat.

June 21

… Coming along well with the Victorian stuff. Zipped through *"The Uninhabited House"* and *"Monsieur Maurice,"* both very literate, sophisticated. Deep into the terrible suffering of *"The Amber Witch,"* poor priest and daughter near starvation, when Deborah called me in for dinner. Roast beef, with salad made from garden lettuce. Quite good. And Deborah was wearing one of the few sleeveless dresses I've seen on her. So she has a body after all…

A rainy night. Hung around the house for a while reading in their living room while Sarr whittled and Deborah crocheted. Rain sounded better from in there than it does out here where it's not so cozy.

At eleven we turned on the news, cats purring around us, Sarr with Zoë on his lap, Deborah petting Phaedra, me sniffling… Halfway through the wrap-up I pointed to Bwada, curled up at my feet, and said, "Look at her. You'd think she was watching the news with us." Deborah laughed and leaned over to scratch Bwada behind the ears. As she did so, Bwada turned to look at me.

The rain is letting up slightly. I can still hear the dripping from the trees, leaf to leaf to the dead leaves lining the forest floor; it will probably continue on and off all night. Occasionally I think I hear thrashings in one of the oaks near the barn, but then the sound turns into the falling of the rain.

Mildew higher on the walls of this place. Glad my books are on shelves off the ground. So damp in here my envelopes are ruined-glue moistened, sealing them all shut. Stamps that had been in my wallet are stuck to the dollar bills. At night my sheets are clammy and cold, but each morning I wake up sweating.

Finished *"The Amber Witch,"* really fine. Would that all lives had such happy endings.

June 22

When Poroths returned from church, helped them prepare strips of molding for the upstairs study. Worked out in the tool shed, one of the old wooden outbuildings. I measured, Sarr sawed, Deborah sanded. All in all, hardly felt useful, but what the hell?

While they were busy, I sat staring out the window. There's a narrow cement walk running from the shed to the main house, and, as was their habit, Minnie and Felix, two of the kittens, were crouched in the middle of it taking in the late afternoon sun. Suddenly Bwada appeared on the house's front porch and began slinking along the cement path in our direction, tail swishing from side to side. When she neared the kittens she gave a snarl-I could see her mouth working-and they leaped to their feet, bristling, and ran off into the grass.

Called this to Poroths' attention. They said, in effect, Yes, we know, she's always been nasty to the kittens, probably because she never had any of her own. And besides, she's getting older.

When I turned back to the window, Bwada was gone. Asked the Poroths if they didn't think she'd gotten worse lately. Realized that, in speaking, I'd unconsciously dropped my voice, as if someone might be listening through the chinks in the floor-boards.

Deborah conceded that, yes, the cat is behaving worse these days toward the others. And not just toward the kittens, as before. Butch, the adult orange male, seems particularly afraid of her…

Am a little angry at the Poroths. Will have to tell them when I see them tomorrow morning. They claim they never come into these rooms, respect privacy of a tenant, *etc.* etc., but one of them must have been in here, because I've just noticed my can of insect spray is missing. I don't mind their borrowing it, but I like to have it by my bed on nights like this. Went over room looking for spiders, just in case; had a fat copy of *American Scholar* in my hand to crush them (only thing it's good for). But found nothing.

Tried to read some *Walden* as a break from all the horror stuff, but found my eyes too irritated, watery. Keep scratching them as I write this. Nose pretty clogged, too-the damned allergy's worse tonight. Probably because of the dampness. Expect I'll have trouble getting to sleep.

June 24

Slept very late this morning because the noise from the woods kept me up late last night. (Come to think of it, the Poroths' praying was unusually loud as well, but that wasn't what bothered me.) I'd been in the middle of writing in this journal-some thoughts on A. E. Coppard-when it came. I immediately stopped writing and shut off the light.

At first it sounded like something in the woods near my room-an animal? a child? I couldn't tell, but smaller than a man-shuffling through the dead leaves, kicking them around as if it didn't care who heard it. There was a

snapping of branches and, every so often, a silence and then a bump, as if it were hopping over fallen logs. I stood in the dark listening to it, then crept to the window and looked out. Thought I noticed some bushes moving, back there in the undergrowth, but it may have been the wind.

The sound grew farther away. Whatever it was must have been walking directly out into the deepest part of the woods, where the ground gets swampy and treacherous, because, very faintly, I could hear the sucking sounds of feet slogging through the mud.

I stood by the window for almost an hour, occasionally hearing what I thought were movements off there in the swamp, but finally all was quiet except for the crickets and the frogs. I had no intention of going out there with my flashlight in search of the intruder-that's for guys in stories, I'm much too chicken-and I wondered if I should call Sarr. But by this time the noise had stopped and whatever it was had obviously moved on. Besides, I tend to think he'd have been angry if I'd awakened him and Deborah just because some stray dog had wandered near the farm. I recalled how annoyed he'd been earlier that day when-maybe not all that tactfully-I'd asked him what he'd done with my bug spray. (Must remember to walk into town tomorrow and pick up a can. Still can't figure out where I misplaced mine.)

I went over to the windows on the other side and watched the moonlight on the barn for a while; my nose probably looked crosshatched from pressing against the screen. In contrast to the woods, the grass looked peaceful under the full moon. Then I lay in bed, but had a hard time falling asleep. Just as I was getting relaxed the sounds started again. High-pitched wails and caterwauls, from deep within the woods. Even after thinking about it all today, I still don't know whether the noise was human or animal. There were no actual words, of that I'm certain, but nevertheless there was the impression of *singing*. In a crazy, tuneless kind of way the sound seemed to carry the same solemn rhythm as the Poroths' prayers earlier that night.

The noise only lasted a minute or two, but I lay awake till the sky began to get lighter. Probably should have read a little more Coppard, but was reluctant to turn on the lamp.

… Slept all morning and, in the afternoon, followed the road the opposite direction from Gilead, seeking anything of interest. But the road just gets muddier and muddier till it disappears altogether by the ruins of an old homestead-rocks and cement covered with moss-and it looked so much like poison ivy around there that I didn't want to risk tramping through.

At dinner (pork chops, home-grown stringbeans, and pudding-quite good), mentioned the noise of last night. Sarr acted very concerned and went to his room to look up something in one of his books; Deborah and I discussed the matter at some length and concluded that the shuffling sounds weren't necessarily related to the wailing. The former were almost definitely those of a dog-dozens in the area, and they love to prowl around at night, exploring, hunting coons-and as for the wailing… well, it's hard to say. She thinks it may have been an owl or whippoorwill, while I suspect it may have been that same stray dog. I've heard the howl of wolves and I've heard hounds baying at the moon, and both have the same element of, I suppose, *worship* in them that these did.

Sarr came back downstairs and said he couldn't find what he'd been looking for. Said that when he moved into this farm he'd had "a fit of piety" and had burned a lot of old books he'd found in the attic; now he wishes he hadn't.

Looked up something on my own after leaving the Poroths. *Field Guide to Mammals* lists both red and gray foxes and, believe it or not, coyotes as surviving here in New Jersey. No wolves left, though-but the guide might be wrong.

Then, on a silly impulse, opened another reference book, Barbara Byfield's *Glass Harmonica*. Sure enough, my hunch was right: looked up June twenty-third, and it said, "St. John's Eve. Sabbats likely."

I'll stick to the natural explanation. Still, I'm glad Mrs. Byfield lists nothing for tonight; I'd like to get some sleep. There is, of course, a beautiful full moon-werewolf weather, as Maria Ouspenskaya might have said. But then, there are no wolves left in New Jersey…

(Which reminds me, really must read some Marryat and Endore. But only after *Northanger Abbey*; my course always comes first.)

June 25

… After returning from town, the farm looked very lonely. Wish they had a library in Gilead with more than religious tracts. Or a stand that sold the Times. (Though it's strange how, after a week or two, you no longer miss it.)

Overheated from walk-am I getting out of shape? Or is it just the hot weather? Took a cold shower. When I opened the bathroom door I accidentally let Bwada out-I'd wondered why the chair was propped against it. She raced into the kitchen, pushed open the screen door by herself, and I had no chance to catch her. (Wouldn't have attempted to anyway; her claws are wicked.) I apologized later when Deborah came in from the fields. She said Bwada had become vicious toward the other cats and that Sarr had confined her to the bathroom as punishment. The first time he'd shut her in there, Deborah said, the cat had gotten out; apparently she's smart enough to turn the doorknob by swatting at it a few times. Hence the chair.

Sarr came in carrying Bwada, both obviously out of temper. He'd seen a streak of orange running through the field toward him, followed by a gray blur. Butch had stopped at his feet and Bwada had pounced on him, but before she could do any damage Sarr had grabbed her around the neck and carried her back here. He'd been bitten once and scratched a lot on his hands, but not badly; maybe the cat still likes him best. He threw her back in the bathroom and shoved the chair against the door, then sat down and asked Deborah to join him in some silent prayer. I thumbed uneasily through a religious magazine till they were done, and we sat down to dinner.

I apologized again, but he said he wasn't mad at me, that the Devil had gotten into his cat. It was obvious he meant that quite literally. During dinner (omelet-the hens have been laying well) we heard a grating sound from the bathroom, and Sarr ran in to find her almost out the window; somehow she must have been strong enough to slide the sash up partway. She seemed so placid, though, when Sarr pulled her down from the sill-he'd

been expecting another fight-that he let her out into the kitchen. At this she simply curled up near the stove and went to sleep; I guess she'd worked off her rage for the day. The other cats gave her a wide berth, though.

Watched a couple of hours of television with the Poroths. They may have gone to college, but the shows they find interesting… God! I'm ashamed of myself for sitting there like a cretin in front of that box. I won't even mention what we watched, lest history record the true abysmality of my tastes.

And yet I find that the TV draws us closer, as if we were having an adventure together. Shared experience, really. Like knowing the same people or going to the same school.

But there's a lot of duplicity in those Poroths-and I don't mean just religious hypocrisy, either. Came out here after watching the news, and though I hate to accuse anyone of spying on me, there's no doubt that Sarr or Deborah has been inside this room today. I began tonight's entry with great irritation because I found my desk in disarray; this journal wasn't even put back in the right drawer. I keep all my pens on one side, all my pencils on another, ink and erasers in the middle, etc., and when I sat down tonight I saw that everything was out of place. Thank God I haven't included anything too personal in here… What I assume happened was that Deborah came in to wash the mildew off the walls-she's mentioned doing so several times, and she knew I'd be in town part of the day-and got sidetracked into reading this, thinking it must be some kind of secret diary. (I'm sure she was disappointed to find that it's merely a literary journal, with nothing about her in it.)

What bugs me is the difficulty of broaching the subject. I can't just walk in and charge Deborah with being a sneak-Sarr is moody enough as it is-and even if I hint at "someone messing up my desk," they'll know what I mean and perhaps get angry. Whenever possible I prefer to avoid unpleasantness. I guess the best thing to do is simply hide this book under my mattress from now on and say nothing. If it happens again, though, I'll definitely move out of here.

… I've been reading some *Northanger Abbey*. Really quite witty, as all her stuff is, but it's obvious the mock-Gothic bit isn't central to the story. I'd thought it was going to be a real parody… Love stories always tend to bore me, and normally I'd be asleep right now, but my damned nose is so clogged tonight that it's hard to breathe when I lie back. Usually being out here clears it up. I've used this goddamned inhaler a dozen times in the past hour, but within a few minutes I sneeze and have to use it again. Wish Deborah'd gotten around to cleaning off the mildew instead of wasting her time looking in here for True Confessions and deep dark secrets…

Think I hear something moving outside. Best to shut off my light.

June 30

Slept late. Read some Shirley Jackson stories over breakfast, but got so turned off at her view of humanity that I switched to old Aleister Crowley, who at least keeps a sunny disposition. For her, people in the country are callous and vicious, those in the city are callous and vicious, husbands are (of course) callous and vicious, and children are merely sadistic. The only ones with feelings are her put-upon middle-aged heroines, with whom she obviously identifies. I guess if she didn't write so well the stories wouldn't sting so.

Inspired by Crowley, walked back to the pool in the woods. Had visions of climbing a tree, swinging on vines, anything to commemorate his exploits… Saw something dead floating in the center of the pool and ran back to the farm. Copperhead? Caterpillar? It had somehow opened up…

Joined Sarr chopping stakes for tomatoes. Could hear his ax all over the farm. He told me Bwada hadn't come home last night, and no sign of her this morning. Good riddance, as far as I'm concerned. Helped him chop some stakes while he was busy peeling off bark. That ax can get heavy fast! My arm hurt after three lousy stakes, and Sarr had already chopped fifteen or sixteen. Must start exercising. But I'll wait till my arm's less tired…

July 2

Unpleasant day. Two a.m. now and still can't relax.

Sarr woke me up this morning-stood at my window calling “Jeremy… Jeremy…” over and over very quietly. He had something in his hand which, through the screen, I first took for a farm implement; then I saw it was a rifle. He said he wanted me to help him. With what? I asked.

“A burial.”

Last night, after he and Deborah had gone to bed, they’d heard the kitchen door open and someone enter the house. They both assumed it was me, come to use the bathroom-but then they heard the cats screaming. Sarr ran down and switched on the light in time to see Bwada on top of Butch, claws in his side, fangs buried in his neck. From the way he described it, sounds almost sexual in reverse. Butch had stopped struggling, and Minnie, the orange kitten, was already dead. The door was partly open, and when Bwada saw Sarr, she ran out.

Sarr and Deborah hadn’t followed her; they’d spent the night praying over the bodies of Minnie and Butch. I *thought* I’d heard their voices late last night, but that’s all I heard, probably because I’d been playing my radio. (Something I rarely do-you can’t hear noises from the woods with it on.)

Poroths took deaths the way they’d take the death of a child. Regular little funeral service over by the unused pasture. (Hard to say if Sarr and Deborah were dressed in mourning, since that’s the way they always dress.) Must admit I didn’t feel particularly involved-my allergy’s never permitted me to take much interest in the cats, though I’m fond of Felix-but I tried to act concerned: when Sarr asked, appropriately, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” (Jeremiah VIII:22), I nodded gravely. Read passages out of Deborah’s Bible (Sarr seemed to know them all by heart), said amen when they did, knelt when they knelt, and tried to comfort Deborah when she cried. Asked her if cats could go to heaven, received a tearful “Of course.” But Sarr added that Bwada would burn in hell.

What concerned me, apparently a lot more than it did either of them, was how the damned thing could get into the house. Sarr gave me this stupid, earnest answer: “She was always a smart cat.” Like an outlaw’s mother, still proud of her baby…

Yet he and I looked all over the land for her so he could kill her. Barns, tool shed, old stables, garbage dump, *etc.* He called her and pleaded with her, swore to me she hadn't always been like this.

We could hardly check every tree on the farm-unfortunately-and the woods are a perfect hiding place, even for animals larger than a cat. So naturally we found no trace of her. We did try, though; we even walked up the road as far as the ruined homestead.

But for all that, we could have stayed much closer to home.

We returned for dinner, and I stopped at my room to change clothes. My door was open. Nothing inside was ruined, everything was in its place, everything as it should be-except the bed. The sheets were in tatters right down to the mattress, and the pillow had been ripped to shreds. Feathers were all over the floor. There were even claw marks on my blanket.

At dinner the Poroths demanded they be allowed to pay for the damage-nonsense, I said, they have enough to worry about-and Sarr suggested I sleep downstairs in their living room. "No need for that," I told him, "I've got lots more sheets." But he said no, he didn't mean that: he meant for my own protection. He believes the thing is particularly inimical, for some reason, toward me.

It seemed so absurd at the time… I mean, nothing but a big fat gray cat. But now, sitting out here, a few feathers still scattered on the floor around my bed, I wish I were back inside the house. I did give in to Sarr when he insisted I take his ax with me… But what I'd rather have is simply a room without windows.

I don't think I want to go to sleep tonight, which is one reason I'm continuing to write this. Just sit up all night on my new bedsheets, my back against the Poroths' pillow, leaning against the wall behind me, the ax beside me on the bed, this journal on my lap… The thing is, I'm rather tired out from all the walking I did today. Not used to that much exercise.

I'm pathetically aware of every sound. At least once every five minutes some snapping of a branch or rustling of leaves makes me jump.

“Thou art my hope in the day of evil.” At least that’s what the man said…

July 3

Woke up this morning with the journal and the ax cradled in my arms. What awakened me was the trouble I had breathing-nose all clogged, gasping for breath. Down the center of one of my screens, facing the woods, was a huge slash…

July 15

Pleasant day, St. Swithin’s Day-and yet, my birthday. Thirty years old, lordy lordy lordy. Today I am a man. First dull thoughts on waking: “Damnation. Thirty today.” But another voice inside me, smaller but more sensible, spat contemptuously at such an artificial way of charting time. “Ah, don’t give it another thought,” it said. “You’ve still got plenty of time to fool around.” Advice I took to heart.

Weather today? Actually, somewhat nasty. And thus the weather for the next forty days, since “If rain on St. Swithin’s Day, forsooth, no summer drouthe,” or something like that. My birthday predicts the weather. It’s even mentioned in *The Glass Harmonica*.

As one must, took a critical self-assessment. First area for improvement: flabby body. Second? Less bookish, perhaps? Nonsense-I’m satisfied with the progress I’ve made. “And seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not.” (Jeremiah XLV:5) So I simply did what I remembered from the RCAF exercise series and got good and winded. Flexed my stringy muscles in the shower, certain I’ll be a Human Dynamo by the end of the summer. Simply a matter of willpower.

Was so ambitious I trimmed the ivy around my windows again. It’s begun to block the light, and someday I may not be able to get out the door.

Read Ruthven Todd’s *Lost Traveller*. Merely the narrative of a dream turned to nightmare, and illogical as hell. Wish, too, that there’d been more than merely a few hints of sex. On the whole, rather unpleasant; that gruesome ending is so inevitable…

Took me much of the afternoon. Then came upon an incredible essay by Lafcadio Hearn, something entitled “Gaki,” detailing the curious Japanese belief that insects are really demons or the ghosts of evil men. Uncomfortably convincing!

Dinner late because Deborah, bless her, was baking me a cake. Had time to walk into town and phone parents. Happy birthday, happy birthday. Both voiced first worry-mustn’t I be getting bored out here? Assured them I still had plenty of books and did not grow tired of reading.

“But it’s so… *secluded* out there,” Mom said. “Don’t you get lonely?”

Ah, she hadn’t reckoned on the inner resources of a man of thirty. Was tempted to quote *Walden*-“Why should I feel lonely? Is not our planet in the Milky Way?”-but refrained. How can I get lonely, I asked, when there’s still so much to read? Besides, there are the Poroths to talk to.

Then the kicker: Dad wanted to know about the cat. Last time I’d spoken to them it had sounded like a very real danger. “Are you still sleeping inside the farmhouse, I hope?”

No, I told him, really, I only had to do that for a few days, while it was prowling around at night. Yes, it had killed some chickens-a hen every night, in fact. But there were only four of them, and then it stopped. We haven’t had a sign of it in more than a week. (I didn’t tell him that it had left the hens uneaten, dead in the nest. No need to upset him further.)

“But what it did to your sheets…” he went on. “If you’d been sleeping… Such savagery.”

Yes, that was unfortunate, but there’s been no trouble since. Honest. It was only an animal, after all, just a housecat gone a little wild. It posed the same kind of threat as (I was going to say, logically, a wildcat; but for Mom said) a nasty little dog. Like Mrs. Miller’s bull terrier. Besides, it’s probably miles and miles away by now. Or dead.

They offered to drive out with packages of food, magazines, a portable TV, but I made it clear I needed nothing. Getting too fat, actually.

Still light when I got back. Deborah had finished the cake, Sarr brought up some wine from the cellar, and we had a nice little celebration. The two of them being over thirty, they were happy to welcome me to the fold.

It's nice out here. The wine has relaxed me and I keep yawning. It was good to talk to Mom and Dad again. Just as long as I don't dream of *The Lost Traveller*, I'll be content. And happier still if I don't dream at all…

July 30

Well, Bwada is dead-this time for sure. We'll bury her tomorrow. Deborah was hurt, just how badly I can't say, but she managed to fight Bwada off. Tough woman, though she seems a little shaken. And with good reason.

It happened this way: Sarr and I were in the tool shed after dinner, building more shelves for the upstairs study. Though the fireflies were out, there was still a little daylight left. Deborah had gone up to bed after doing the dishes; she's been tired a lot lately, falls asleep early every night while watching TV with Sarr. He thinks it may be something in the well water.

It had begun to get dark, but we were still working. Sarr dropped a box of nails, and while we were picking them up, he thought he heard a scream. Since I hadn't heard anything, he shrugged and was about to start sawing again when-fortunately-he changed his mind and ran off to the house. I followed him as far as the porch, not sure whether to go upstairs, until I heard him pounding on their bedroom door and calling Deborah's name. As I ran up the stairs I heard her say, "Wait a minute. Don't come in. I'll unlock the door… soon." Her voice was extremely hoarse, practically a croaking. We heard her rummaging in the closet-finding her bathrobe, I suppose-and then she opened the door.

She looked absolutely white. Her long hair was in tangles and her robe buttoned incorrectly. Around her neck she had wrapped a towel, but we could see patches of blood soaking through it. Sarr helped her over to the bed, shouting at me to bring up some bandages from the bathroom.

When I returned Deborah was lying in bed, still pressing the towel to her throat. I asked Sarr what had happened; it almost looked as if the woman had tried suicide.

He didn't say anything, just pointed to the floor on the other side of the bed. I stepped around for a look. A crumpled gray shape was lying there, half covered by the bedclothes. It was Bwada, a wicked-looking wound in her side. On the floor next to her lay an umbrella-the thing that Deborah had used to kill her.

She told us she'd been asleep when she felt something crawl heavily over her face. It had been like a bad dream. She'd tried to sit up, and suddenly Bwada was at her throat, digging in. Luckily she'd had the strength to tear the animal off and dash to the closet, where the first weapon at hand was the umbrella. Just as the cat sprang at her again, Deborah said, she'd raised the weapon and lunged. Amazing; how many women, I wonder, would have had such presence of mind? The rest sounds incredible to me, but it's probably the sort of crazy thing that happens in moments like this: somehow the cat had impaled itself on the umbrella.

Her voice, as she spoke, was barely more than a whisper. Sarr had to persuade her to remove the towel from her throat; she kept protesting that she wasn't hurt that badly, that the towel had stopped the bleeding. Sure enough, when Sarr finally lifted the cloth from her neck, the wounds proved relatively small, the slash marks already clotting. Thank God that thing didn't really get its teeth in…

My guess-only a guess-is that it had been weakened from days of living in the woods. (It was obviously incapable of feeding itself adequately, as I think was proved by its failure to eat the hens it had killed.) While Sarr dressed Deborah's wounds, I pulled back the bedclothes and took a closer look at the animal's body. The fur was matted and patchy. Odd that an umbrella could make a puncture like that, ringed by flaps of skin, as if the flesh had been pushed outward. Deborah must have had extraordinary good luck to have jabbed the animal precisely in its old wound, which had reopened. Naturally I didn't mention this to Sarr.

He made dinner for us tonight-soup, actually, because he thought that was best for Deborah. Her voice sounded so bad he told her not to strain it any more by talking, at which she nodded and smiled. We both had to help her downstairs, as she was clearly weak from shock.

In the morning Sarr will have the doctor out. He'll have to examine the cat, too, to check for rabies, so we put the body in the freezer to preserve it as well as possible. Afterward we'll bury it.

Deborah seemed okay when I left. Sarr was reading through some medical books, and she was just lying on the living room couch gazing at her husband with a look of purest gratitude-not moving, not saying anything, not even blinking.

I feel quite relieved. God knows how many nights I've lain here thinking every sound I heard was Bwada. I'll feel more relieved, of course, when that demon's safely underground; but I think I can say, at the risk of being melodramatic, that the reign of terror is over.

Hmm, I'm still a little hungry-used to more than soup for dinner. These daily push-ups burn up energy. I'll probably dream of hamburgers and chocolate layer cakes.

July 31

… The doctor collected scrapings from Bwada's teeth and scolded us for doing a poor job of preserving the body. Said storing it in the freezer was a sensible idea, but that we should have done so sooner, since it was already decomposing. The dampness, I imagine, must act fast on dead flesh.

He pronounced Deborah in excellent condition-the marks on her throat are, remarkably, almost healed-but he said her reflexes were a little off. Sarr invited him to stay for the burial, but he declined-and quite emphatically, at that. He's not a member of their order, doesn't live in the area, and apparently doesn't get along that well with the people of Gilead, most of whom mistrust modern science. (Not that the old geezer sounded very representative of modern science. When I asked him for some good exercises, he recommended "chopping wood and running down deer.")

Standing under the heavy clouds, Sarr looked like a revivalist minister. His sermon was from Jeremiah XXII:19-"He shall be buried with the burial of an ass." The burial took place far from the graves of Bwada's two victims, and closer to the woods. We sang one song, Deborah just mouthing the words (still mustn't strain throat muscles). Sarr solemnly asked the Lord to look mercifully upon all His creatures, and I muttered an "amen." Then we walked back to the house, Deborah leaning on Sarr's arm; she's still a little stiff.

It was gray the rest of the day, and I sat in my room reading *The King in Yellow*-or rather, Chambers' collection of the same name. One look at the real book, so Chambers would claim, and I might not live to see the morrow, at least through the eyes of a sane man. (That single gimmick-masterful, I admit-seems to be his sole inspiration.)

I was disappointed that dinner was again made by Sarr; Deborah was upstairs resting, he said. He sounded concerned, felt there were things wrong with her the doctor had overlooked. We ate our meal in silence, and I came back here immediately after washing the dishes. Feel very drowsy and, for some reason, also rather depressed. It may be the gloomy weather-we are, after all, just animals, more affected by the sun and the seasons than we like to admit. More likely it was the absence of Deborah tonight. Hope she feels better.

Note: The freezer still smells of the cat's body; opened it tonight and got a strong whiff of decay.

August 1

Writing this, breaking habit, in early morning. Went to bed last night just after finishing the entry above, but was awakened around two by sounds coming from the woods. Wailing, deeper than before, followed by a low, guttural monologue. No words, at least that I could distinguish. If frogs could talk… For some reason I fell asleep before the sounds ended, so I don't know what followed.

Could very well have been an owl of some kind, and later a large bullfrog. But I quote, without comment, from *The Glass Harmonica*: "July 31:

Lammas Eve. Sabbats likely."

August 4

Little energy to write tonight, and even less to write about. (Come to think of it, I slept most of the day: woke up at eleven, later took an afternoon nap. Alas, senile at thirty!) Too tired to shave, and haven't had the energy to clean this place, either; thinking about work is easier than doing it. The ivy's beginning to cover the windows again, and the mildew's been climbing steadily up the walls. It's like a dark green band that keeps widening. Soon it will reach my books…

Speaking of which, note: opened M. R. James at lunch today-*Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*-and a silverfish slithered out. Omen?

Played a little game with myself this evening—

I just had one hell of a shock. While writing the above I heard a soft tapping, like nervous fingers drumming on a table, and discovered an enormous spider, biggest of the summer, crawling only a few inches from my ankle. It must have been living behind this desk…

When you can hear a spider walk across the floor, you *know* it's time to keep your socks on. Thank God for insecticide.

Oh, yeah, that game-the What If game. I probably play it too often. (Vain attempt to enlarge realm of the possible? Heighten my own sensitivity? Or merely work myself into an icy sweat?) I pose unpleasant questions for myself and consider the consequences, e.g., what if this glorified chicken coop is sinking into quicksand? (Wouldn't be at all surprised.) What if the Poroths are tired of me? What if I woke up inside my own coffin?

What if I never see New York again?

What if some horror stories aren't really fiction? If Machen sometimes told the truth? If there *are* White People, malevolent little faces peering out of the moonlight? Whispers in the grass?

Poisonous things in the woods? Perfect hate and evil in the world?

Enough of this foolishness. Time for bed.

August 9

… Read some Hawthorne in the morning and, over lunch, reread this week's *Hunterdon County Democrat* for the dozenth time. Sarr and Deborah were working somewhere in the fields, and I felt I ought to get some physical activity myself; but the thought of starting my exercises again after more than a week's laziness just seemed too unpleasant… I took a walk down the road, but only as far as a smashed-up cement culvert half buried in the woods. I was bored, but Gilead just seemed too far away.

Was going to cut the ivy away from my windows when I got back, but decided the place looks more artistic covered in vines. Rationalization?

Chatted with Poroths about politics. The World Situation, a little cosmology, blah blah blah. Dinner wasn't very good, probably because I'd been looking forward to it all day. The lamb was underdone and the beans were cold. Still, I'm always the gentleman, and was almost pleased when Deborah agreed to my offer to do the dishes. I've been doing them a lot lately.

I didn't have much interest in reading tonight and would have been up for some television, but Sarr's recently gotten into one of his religious kicks and began mumbling prayers to himself immediately after dinner. (Deborah, more human, wanted to watch the TV news. She seems to have an insatiable curiosity about world events, yet she claims the isolation here appeals to her.) Absorbed in his chanting, Sarr made me uncomfortable-I didn't like his face-and so after doing the dishes, I left.

I've been listening to the radio for the last hour or so… I recall days when I'd have gotten uptight at having wasted an hour-but out here I've lost all track of time. Feel adrift-a little disconcerting, but healthy, I'm sure.

… Shut the radio off a moment ago, and now realize my room is filled with crickets. Up close their sound is hardly pleasant-cross between a radiator

and a tea-kettle, very shrill. They'd been sounding off all night, but I'd thought it was interference on the radio.

Now I notice them; they're all over the room. A couple of dozen, I should think. Hate to kill them, really-they're one of the few insects I can stand, along with ladybugs and fireflies. But they make such a racket!

Wonder how they got in…

August 14

Played with Felix all morning-mainly watching him chase insects, climb trees, doze in the sun. Spectator sport. After lunch went back to my room to look up something in Lovecraft and discovered my books were out of order. (Saki, for example, was filed under "S," whereas-whether out of fastidiousness or pedantry-I've always preferred to file him as "Munro.") This is definitely one of the Poroths' doing. I'm pissed they didn't mention coming in here, but also a little surprised they'd have any interest in this stuff.

Arranged them correctly again, then sat down to reread Lovecraft's essay on "Supernatural Horror in Literature." It upset me to see how little I've actually read, how far I still have to go. So many obscure authors, so many books I've never come across… Left me feeling depressed and tired, so I took a nap for the rest of the afternoon.

Over dinner-vegetable omelet, rather tasteless-Deborah continued to question us on current events. It's getting to be like junior high school, with daily newspaper quizzes… Don't know how she got started on this, or why the sudden interest, but it obviously annoys the hell out of Sarr.

Sarr used to be a sucker for her little-girl pleadings-I remember how he used to carry her upstairs, becoming pathetically tender, the moment she'd say, "Oh, honey, I'm so tired"-but now he just becomes angry. Often he goes off morose and alone to pray, and the only time he laughs is when he watches television.

Tonight, thank God, he was in a mood to forgo the prayers, and so after dinner we all watched a lot of offensively ignorant programs. I was disturbed to find myself laughing along with the canned laughter, but I have to admit the TV helps us get along better together. Came back here after the news.

Not very tired, having slept so much of the afternoon, so began to read John Christopher's *The Possessors*; but good though it was, my mind began to wander to all the books I *haven't* yet read, and I got so depressed I turned on the radio. Find it takes my mind off things.

August 19

Slept long into the morning, then walked down to the brook, scratching groggily. Deborah was kneeling by the water, lost, it seemed, in daydream, and I was embarrassed because I'd come upon her talking to herself. We exchanged a few insincere words and she went back toward the house.

Sat by some rocks, throwing blades of grass into the water. The sun on my head felt almost painful, as if my brain were growing too large for my skull. I turned and looked at the farmhouse. In the distance it looked like a picture at the other end of a large room, the grass for a carpet, the ceiling the sky. Deborah was stroking a cat, then seemed to grow angry when it struggled from her arms; I could hear the screen door slam as she went into the kitchen, but the sound reached me so long after the visual image that the whole scene struck me as, somehow, fake. I gazed up at the maples behind me, and they seemed trees out of a cheap postcard, the kind in which thinly colored paint is dabbed over a black-and-white photograph; if you look closely you can see that the green in the trees is not merely in the leaves, but rather floats as a vapor over leaves, branches, parts of the sky… The trees behind me seemed the productions of a poor painter, the color and shape not quite meshing. Parts of the sky were green, and pieces of the green seemed to float away from my vision. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't follow them.

Far down the stream I could see something small and kicking, a black beetle, legs in the air, borne swiftly along in the current. Then it was gone.

Thumbed through the Bible while I ate my lunch-mostly cookies. By late afternoon I was playing word games while I lay on the grass near my room. The shrill twitter of the birds, I would say, the birds singing in the sun… And inexorably I'd continue with the sun dying in the moonlight, the moonlight falling on the floor, the floor sagging to the cellar, the cellar filling with water, the water seeping into the ground, the ground twisting into smoke, the smoke staining the sky, the sky burning in the sun, the sun dying in the moonlight, the moonlight falling on the floor…-melancholy progressions that held my mind like a whirlpool.

Sarr woke me for dinner; I had dozed off, and my clothes were damp from the grass. As we walked up to the house together he whispered that, earlier in the day, he'd come upon his wife bending over me, peering into my sleeping face. "Her eyes were wide," he said. "Like Bwada's." I said I didn't understand why he was telling me this.

"Because," he recited in a whisper, gripping my arm, "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?"

I recognized that. Jeremiah XVII:9.

Dinner was especially uncomfortable; the two of them sat picking at their food, occasionally raising their eyes to one another like children in a staring contest. I longed for the conversations of our early days, inconsequential though they must have been, and wondered where things had first gone wrong.

The meal was dry and unappetizing, but the dessert looked delicious-chocolate mousse, made from an old family recipe. Deborah had served it earlier in the summer and knew both Sarr and I loved it. This time, however, she gave none to herself, explaining that she had to watch her weight.

"Then we'll not eat any!" Sarr shouted, and with that he snatched my dish from in front of me, grabbed his own, and hurled them both against the wall, where they splattered like mudballs.

Deborah was very still; she said nothing, just sat there watching us. She didn't look particularly afraid of this madman, I was happy to see-but *I* was. He may have read my thoughts, because as I got up from my seat, he said much more gently, in the soft voice normal to him, "Sorry, Jeremy. I know you hate scenes. We'll pray for each other, all right?"

"Are you okay?" I asked Deborah. "I'm going out now, but I'll stay if you think you'll need me for anything." She stared at me with a slight smile and shook her head. I raised my eyebrows and nodded toward her husband, and she shrugged.

"Things will work out," she said. I could hear Sarr laughing as I shut the door.

When I snapped on the light out here I took off my shirt and stood in front of the little mirror. It had been nearly a week since I'd showered, and I'd become used to the smell of my body. My hair had wound itself into greasy brown curls, my beard was at least two weeks old, and my eyes… well, the eyes that stared back at me looked like those of an old man. The whites were turning yellow, like old teeth. I looked at my chest and arms, flabby at thirty, and I thought of the frightening alterations in my friend Sarr, and I knew I'd have to get out of here.

Just glanced at my watch. It's now quite late: two-thirty. I've been packing my things.

August 20

I woke about an hour ago and continued packing. Lots of books to put away, but I'm just about done. It's not even nine a.m. yet, much earlier than I normally get up; but I guess the thought of leaving here fills me with energy.

The first thing I saw on rising was a garden spider whose body was as big as some of the mice the cats have killed. It was sitting on the ivy that grows over my window sill-fortunately on the other side of the screen. Apparently it had had good hunting all summer, preying on the insects that live in the leaves. Concluding that nothing so big and fearsome has a right to live, I

held the spray can against the screen and doused the creature with poison. It struggled halfway up the screen, then stopped, arched its legs, and dropped backwards into the ivy.

I plan to walk into town this morning and telephone the office in Flemington where I rented my car. If they can have one ready today I'll hitch there to pick it up; otherwise I'll spend tonight here and pick it up tomorrow. I'll be leaving a little early in the season, but the Poroths already have my month's rent, so they shouldn't be too offended.

And anyway, how could I be expected to stick around here with all that nonsense going on, never knowing when my room might be ransacked, having to put up with Sarr's insane suspicions and Deborah's moodiness?

Before I go into town, though, I really must shave and shower for the good people of Gilead. I've been sitting inside here waiting for some sign the Poroths are up, but as yet-it's almost nine-I've heard nothing. I wouldn't care to barge in on them while they're still having breakfast or, worse, just getting up… So I'll just wait here by the window till I see them.

… Ten o'clock now, and they still haven't come out. Perhaps they're having a talk… I'll give them half an hour more, then I'm going in.

Here my journal ends. Until today, almost a week later, I have not cared to set down any of the events that followed. But here in the temporary safety of this hotel room, protected by a heavy brass travel-lock I had sent up from the hardware store down the street, watched over by the good people of Flemington-and perhaps by something not good-I can continue my narrative.

The first thing I noticed as I approached the house was that the shades were drawn, even in the kitchen. Had they decided to sleep late this morning? I wondered. Throughout my thirty years I have come to associate drawn shades with a foul smell, the smell of a sickroom, of shamefaced poverty and food gone bad, of people lying too long beneath blankets; but I was not ready for the stench of decay that met me when I opened the kitchen door and stepped into the darkness. Something had died in that room-and not recently.

At the moment the smell first hit, four little shapes scrambled across the linoleum toward me and out into the daylight. The Poroths' cats.

By the other wall a lump of shadow moved; a pale face caught light penetrating the shades. Sarr's voice, its habitual softness exaggerated to a whisper: "Jeremy. I thought you were still asleep."

"Can I-"

"No. Don't turn on the light." He got to his feet, a black form towering against the window. Fiddling nervously with the kitchen door-the tin doorknob, the rubber bands stored around it, the fringe at the bottom of the drawn window shade-I opened it wider and let in more sunlight. It fell on the dark thing at his feet, over which he had been crouching: Deborah, the flesh at her throat torn and wrinkled like the skin of an old apple.

Her clothing lay in a heap beside her. She appeared long dead. The eyes were shriveled, sunken into sockets black as a skull's.

I think I may have staggered at that moment, because he came toward me. His steady, unblinking gaze looked so sincere-but *why was he smiling?* "I'll make you understand," he was saying, or something like that; even now I feel my face twisting into horror as I try to write of him. "I had to kill her…"

"You-"

"She tried to kill me," he went on, silencing all questions. "The same thing that possessed Bwada… possessed her."

My hand played behind my back with the bottom of the window shade. "But her throat-"

"That happened a long time ago. Bwada did it. I had nothing to do with… that part." Suddenly his voice rose. "Don't you understand? She tried to stab me with the bread knife." He turned, stooped over, and, clumsy in the darkness, began feeling about him on the floor. "Where is that thing?" he

was mumbling. “I’ll show you…” As he crossed a beam of sunlight, something gleamed like a silver handle on the back of his shirt.

Thinking, perhaps, to help him search, I pulled gently on the window shade, then released it; it snapped upward like a gunshot, flooding the room with light. From deep within the center of his back protruded the dull wooden haft of the bread knife, buried almost completely but for an inch or two of gleaming steel.

He must have heard my intake of breath-that sight chills me even today, the grisly absurdity of the thing-he must have heard me, because immediately he stood, his back to me, and reached up behind himself toward the knife, his arm stretching in vain, his fingers curling around nothing. The blade had been planted in a spot he couldn’t reach.

He turned towards me and shrugged in embarrassment, a child caught in a foolish error. “Oh, yeah,” he said, grinning at his own weakness, “I forgot it was there.”

Suddenly he thrust his face into mine, fixing me in a gaze that never wavered, his eyes wide with candor. “It’s easy for us to forget things,” he explained-and then, still smiling, still watching, volunteered that last trivial piece of information, that final message whose words released me from inaction and left me free to dash from the room, to sprint in panic down the road to town, pursued by what had once been the farmer Sarr Poroth.

It serves no purpose here to dwell on my flight down that twisting dirt road, breathing in such deep gasps that I was soon moaning with every breath; how, with my enemy racing behind me, not even winded, his steps never flagging, I veered into the woods; how I finally lost him, perhaps from the inexperience of whatever thing now controlled his body, and was able to make my way back to the road, only to come upon him again as he rounded a bend; his laughter as he followed me, and how it continued long after I had evaded him a second time; and how, after hiding until nightfall in the old cement culvert, I ran the rest of the way in pitch-darkness, stumbling in the ruts, torn by vines, nearly blinding myself when I ran into a low branch, until I arrived in Gilead filthy, exhausted, and nearly incoherent.

Suffice it to say that my escape was largely a matter of luck, a physical wreck fleeing something oblivious to pain or fatigue; but that, beyond mere luck, I had been impelled by an almost ecstatic sense of dread produced by his last words to me, that last communication from an alien face smiling inches from my own, and which I chose to take as his final warning:

"Sometimes we forget to blink."

You can read the rest in the newspapers. *The Hunterdon County Democrat* covered most of the story, though its man wrote it up as merely another lunatic wife-slaying, the result of loneliness, religious mania, and a mysteriously tainted well. (Traces of insecticide were found, among other things, in the water.) The *Somerset Reporter* took a different slant, implying that I had been the third member of an erotic triangle and that Sarr had murdered his wife in a fit of jealousy.

Needless to say, I was by this time past caring what was written about me. I was too haunted by visions of that lonely, abandoned farmhouse, the wails of its hungry cats, and by the sight of Deborah's corpse, discovered by the police, protruding from that hastily dug grave beyond the cornfield.

Accompanied by state troopers, I returned to my ivy-covered outbuilding. A bread knife had been plunged deep into its door, splintering the wood on the other side. The blood on it was Sarr's.

My journal had been hidden under my mattress and so was untouched, but (I look at them now, piled in cardboard boxes beside my suitcase) my precious books had been hurled about the room, their bindings slashed. My summer is over, and now I sit inside here all day listening to the radio, waiting for the next report. Sarr-or his corpse-has not been found.

I should think the evidence was clear enough to corroborate my story, but I suppose I should have expected the reception it received from the police. They didn't laugh at my theory of "possession"-not to my face, anyway-but they ignored it in obvious embarrassment. Some see a nice young bookworm gone slightly deranged after contact with a murderer; others believe my story to be the desperate fabrication of an adulterer trying to avoid the blame for Deborah's death.

I can understand their reluctance to accept my explanation of the events, for it's one that goes a little beyond the "natural," a little beyond the scientific considerations of motive, *modus operandi*, and fingerprints. But I find it quite unnerving that at least one official-an assistant district attorney, I think, though I'm afraid I'm rather ignorant of these matters-believes I am guilty of murder.

There has, of course, been no arrest. Still, I've been given the time-honored instructions against leaving town.

The theory proposing my own complicity in the events is, I must admit, rather ingenious-and so carefully worked out that it will surely gain more adherents than my own. This police official is going to try to prove that I killed poor Deborah in a fit of passion and, immediately afterward, disposed of Sarr. He points out that their marriage had been an observably happy one until I arrived, a disturbing influence from the city. My motive, he says, was simple lust-unrequited, to be sure-aggravated by boredom. The heat, the insects, and, most of all, the oppressive loneliness-all constituted an environment alien to any I'd been accustomed to, and all worked to unhinge my reason.

I have no cause for fear, however, because this affidavit will certainly establish my innocence. Surely no one can ignore the evidence of my journal (though I can imagine an antagonistic few maintaining that I wrote the journal not at the farm but here in the Union Hotel, this very week).

What galls me is not the suspicions of a few detectives, but the predicament their suspicions place me in. Quite simply, *I cannot run away*. I am compelled to remain locked up in this room, potential prey to whatever the thing that was Sarr Poroth has now become-the thing that was once a cat, and once a woman, and once… what? A large white moth? A serpent? A shrewlike thing with wicked teeth?

A police chief? A president? A boy with eyes of blood that sits beneath my window?

Lord, who will believe me?

It was that night that started it all, I'm convinced of it now. The night I made those strange signs in the tree. The night the crickets missed a beat.

I'm not a philosopher, and I can supply no ready explanation for why this new evil has been released into the world. I'm only a poor scholar, a bookworm, and I must content myself with mumbling a few phrases that keep running through my mind, phrases out of books read long ago when such abstractions meant, at most, a pleasant shudder. I am haunted by scraps from the myth of Pandora, and by a semantic discussion I once read comparing "unnatural" and "supernatural."

And something about "a tiny rent in the fabric of the universe…"

Just large enough to let something in. Something not of nature, and hard to kill. Something with its own obscure purpose.

Ironically, the police may be right. Perhaps it was my visit to Gilead that brought about the deaths. Perhaps I had a hand in letting loose the force that, to date, has snuffed out the lives of four hens, three cats, and at least two people-but will hardly be content to stop there.

I've just checked. He hasn't moved from the steps of the courthouse; and even when I look out my window, the rose spectacles never waver. Who knows where the eyes beneath them point? Who knows if they remember to blink?

Lord, this heat is sweltering. My shirt is sticking to my skin, and droplets of sweat are rolling down my face and dripping onto this page, making the ink run.

My hand is tired from writing, and I think it's time to end this affidavit.

If, as I now believe possible, I inadvertently called down evil from the sky and began the events at Poroth Farm, my death will only be fitting. And after my death, many more. We are all, I'm afraid, in danger. Please, then, forgive this prophet of doom, old at thirty, his last jeremiad: "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.

Renaissance Man

Everyone cheered when the little man told them he was a scientist.

Theoretical physicists danced beside their computers; electronics technicians whooped and hollered, abandoning their instrument panels. The huge laboratory rang with the applause of the assembled journalists, and Salganik of the Herald was moved to describe the scene as “reminiscent of the jubilation NASA workers demonstrated years ago during the Apollo space shots.”

“Thank God!” said Dr. Bazza, an Italian biochemist.

“Thank God he’s not a janitor!”

The reporter looked up from his notes. “Pardon me, sir. You were saying . . .?”

“Thank God we pulled back a man who’ll be able to tell us something.”

“Was there really that much doubt?” asked Salganik, his pencil poised, prepared to take it all down.

“But of course there was,” replied the Italian. “We knew we’d pull back someone from the Harvard Physics Department, because we’re here in the building right now.

But it could have been just anyone. We might have found ourselves questioning a college freshman... Or a scrubwoman... Or even a tourist visiting the lab. We couldn’t be sure exactly where our ATV would appear —”

“ATV,” said the reporter, feverishly writing in his notebook. “That’s ‘area of temporal vacuity,’ of course?”

“Correct. Rather like those devices you Americans used back in the 1970s, on your interplanetary probes, to collect random samplings of soil. Only

this time we've scooped up a living human being, and from our own world. The man is simply—how shall I say it—a random sampling."

"But not completely random, I hope..."

"Oh, no, of course not. We knew that our ATV would appear somewhere in the vicinity of this physics lab; we assumed that it would remain a site for advanced research for years to come. But our notion of locality was really quite vague—just a building. And as for time, we simply knew that our visitor—" he gestured toward the little man, who was smiling and shaking his head in wonder—"would come from somewhere three to four hundred years in the future."

Salganik stared across the room at the new celebrity, now surrounded by cameras and lights. He could have gotten a better view, of course, by watching the television screen on the wall nearby—for the scientist's six-hour sojourn in the present was being televized, in its entirety, around the world —but he preferred to watch the little man with his own eyes.

I was there, he'd be able to tell his grandchildren. I was right there in the room when we plucked a man out of the future.

Some idiot journalist had yelled out the traditional "how does it feel?" question ("How does it feel to be the first man on the moon?" they used to ask. "How does it feel to win seven gold medals? How does it feel to know that your wife and family have been wiped out by a meteor? How does it feel to be elected President?"), and the little man was attempting a reply.

"Well," he was saying, blinking at the lights, "it was all pretty unexpected, this happening to me and all. I mean, I've never won anything in my life, and I never could have imagined that I, of all people, would be the one to... You know. Be here like this. And I want to say that it's certainly a great honour and all, and that I'm certainly as proud as can be to find myself here with you, even if it's only for so short a time... Umm..." He bit his lip, blinking at the lights.

"I'm happy to say that my era is a really, um, advanced one— at least we think it is, ha ha! 'A Third Renaissance of Learning and Scientific

Achievement,' that's the motto of the World's Fair over in Addis Ababa... A renaissance rivalling the one in the early 2200s—but of course you wouldn't know about that, would you? Hmmm... I'm not really a very good speaker, you see, but, um... I sure hope I'll be able to provide you with knowledge that will maybe interest you and, um, help a bit, maybe?"

He smiled bashfully.

"It's remarkable!" muttered Dr. Bazza. "You'd think the language might have changed over the centuries, but this man speaks English better than I do! Perhaps it was cinema that stabilized the language..."

"And a good thing, too," whispered Salganik. "If this project turned out to be a fiasco—if you guys had materialized a three-year-old baby, or some moron with nothing to say—the government would pull its money out so fast you'd get dizzy."

He remembered how hard NASA had tried to persuade Congress that the lunar explorers were carrying back valuable scientific information—that half a dozen bags of moon rubble were worth all those billions of dollars. In the end Congress had deemed the missions "impractical" and had discontinued them. The men in this lab had been under the same kind of pressure...

But it looked as if they'd made a lucky catch. "Oh, yes," the man was saying, "I've been a professor of plasmic biophysics for almost... Let me see... Nearly twenty-eight years."

"Could you tell us what that means?" shouted one of the reporters who had crowded his way toward the front.

Immediately a storm of abuse broke over his head: Hush! Please! Expel this man! Ssshh! We'll get to that later! Quiet!

Reporters were supposed to remain silent, leaving all questions to a panel of scientists who, it was hoped, could make better use of the limited time. That other reporter's question had wasted enough time already...

“Professor,” asked Dr. Sklar, the Nobel Prize-winning pathologist, “let’s start with the most vital issues first.” He spoke solemnly, aware that the world was listening to every word. “I shall not even pause to ask you your name—”

“Modesto 14X Goodyear,” interrupted the little man.

“—or to find out anything about yourself. Those of us gathered here are interested in solving some of our most pressing problems. To begin with—”

He paused portentously, allowing the drama to grow.

“—have men in your time found a cure for cancer?”

The visitor smiled. “Oh my gosh yes,” he replied. “We hardly even talk about cancer any more. I mean, the only ones who come down with it these days are men in deep space, and...”

Sklar cut him off. “Can you explain to us how it is cured?”

There was urgency in his voice.

“Whew!” said the little man, puffing out his cheeks and glancing toward the ceiling. “Hmmm, let’s see. That is a toughie, I’m afraid.” He looked blank for several seconds.

“You see, I’ve never had cancer myself, and few people I know have... But if we got it, we’d ring for a physician, and he’d come and, um...”

“What would he do?”

“Well, he’d give us this drug, and then we’d just ... sleep it off, I guess you’d say.”

“This drug?” demanded Sklar.

“Yes, well, I’m afraid I only know the brand name—Gro-Go-Way, it’s called. But I suppose that’s not much help to you ...”

Dr. Sklar looked disappointed.

“You see, that’s not really my field,” explained the visitor, with an embarrassed shrug.

“A moment ago you spoke of ‘ringing for a physician,’ ” said another panelist. (Dr. Sklar was now busy writing down new questions.) “I’m a communications engineer and I wonder if you might tell us something about communications in your day.”

“Delighted.”

“For example, what exactly happens when you ring for the doctor?”

“Why, he comes immediately. Or at least he’s supposed to. But I don’t mind telling you, quite often you get rude and shoddy treatment, he’ll tell you he’s too busy right now and —”

“Please, sir! How does the thing work? Do you have instruments like this?” The engineer pointed toward a nearby table. “Telephones?”

“Oh, telephones! Yes, sure we have them, only they don’t look like that. My, oh my, what an antique that would make... No, ours fit behind your ear.” He reached back behind his own. “Oh, dear, I’ve left mine off today, otherwise I’d show you... But anyway, it’s different when we ring for a physician. Then we press a red button in the bathroom, right by the bed, and we describe our—But you look confused.”

“No, no, go on.”

“We just say, in effect, ‘I feel sick, send somebody over.’ ”

“And who’s on the other end?”

“Well... people. And they hear me and send help.” He paused, looking a little doubtful. “Of course, it takes a few minutes.”

“And how does all this work? Explain the mechanism.”

“Gee,” said the scientist from the future, “I’m sure I don’t know. I never really bothered to find out. I mean, it’s always been there on the wall, and I just... I feel guilty as hell, but I mean, it’s just not my field. I deal almost exclusively with a type of chromosomatic plant nodule, they’re called Phillips’ bodies, and . . . Well, let me say this about communications: those people on the other end of the line are by no means the most efficient in the world, believe me, the service is atrocious these days and they’re forever going out on strike for one reason or another, so . . .”

“Weapons!” spoke up a general. “What are the most sophisticated weapons in your military’s arsenal?”

“Well, we have no military per se, but . . . Oh, yes, we do have some horrible weapons at our disposal, oh my yes. There’s one called a VRV—I’m not sure what the letters stand for—that can leave a fourteen-meter deep crater where a city used to be, and the neighbouring towns won’t even be touched. One was actually used—on San Juan, Puerto Rico.”

“How does it work?”

“Hmmm . . . You got me. I’m afraid I’m stumped.” He paused, looking downcast—and then brightened. “You know, you want to talk to a nuclear engineer about that. Your best bet would be a fellow named Julio 6X Franklin, an old friend . . . Though of course that’s impossible right now, isn’t it? Hmmm . . . I think I read somewhere that it uses the same principle as the moon pulling on the tides—moon on the tides, does that sound right?—but I’m really not the man to see.”

Salganik leaned toward his companion. “I hate to say it,” he whispered, “but this guy doesn’t know anything about anything. What gives?”

But Dr. Bazza only shook his head. He looked as if he were about to cry.

The little man was attempting to explain the construction of the anti-gravity belt his son wore when walking on lakes.

“It broke down once and we had to have the repairman over. He . . . Let me see, he told me it had a battery, yes, and a triangular chunk of this spongy

substance . . . Levia, I think it's called, but I don't know exactly what it's made of. Zinc, maybe?"

The scientists had stopped taking notes long ago.

Dr. Bazza turned to Salganik. "Listen," he pleaded, his voice edged with desperation, "how much do you think you'd know if you went back into the Dark Ages? Could you tell them how to build an airplane? Or perform an appendectomy? Or make nylon? What good would you be?"

Salganik shrugged. "I guess . . ." he ventured. "I guess that, even during the Renaissance, there weren't many Renaissance Men."

The cameras and tape-recorders continued to whir.

"I recall looking over the repairman's shoulder when he replaced the battery," the little man was saying, "and there was this little bundle of wires . . ."

S.F.

S.F. *n., abbrev*. *Geog*.: San Felipe, city, Chil.; San Fernando, city, Chil., U.S., Philip., Argent.; Santa Fe, city, riv., U.S.; prov., Argent.; San Francisco, earthquake site, U.S. *Other*: Sinn Fein (Jr., *lit.* 'we ourselves'), Ir. pol. movement, early 20th cent.; sacrifice fly *(baseball)*; sinking fund *(econ.)*; survival factor *(ecol)*; science fiction; selective for-getfulness.

-*Oxford English Dictionary*, Fourth Supplement (2002)

Thursday 17 Sept '39

Willie, precious:

How's my little snookums? How's my snookums today? As happy as I am? I hope so, because I'm sure there's never *been* such a wonderful day! I woke up this morning feeling like a young girl again, and when I looked at your picture above my bed, and the sun shining outside my window, there were tears of happiness in my eyes.

And do you know why, precious? Because today I've decided to sit down and write you a letter. Imagine, Willie, a letter of your very own! Baby's First Letter!

There's so much I have to tell you, and I'm so excited I can hardly begin. Why, I don't *remember* the last time I felt so good! Just thinking about you now, and putting your picture here on the table where I can see it better, I feel as if... As if you're right here in the room with me! Of course, it's only an old photograph, not one of those 3-D holograph tilings they have nowadays-but it's a pretty picture just the same. Your Mommy and your Daddy, bless their hearts, are standing behind you looking oh so proud, the light gleaming off their chromium Helmets, and there you are in front of them, in your little plastic sunsuit, fast asleep with your thumb in your mouth, just as cute as can be! It's as if you're sitting right here beside me, I can almost reach out and touch you. Ooooh, snookums snookums snookums, Great-Granny could just eat you *up* you're so cute! Do you know

how cute? Why, you're just the cutest little baby in the whole world, *that's* how cute you are! And if your Great-Granny were with you right now, do you know what she'd do? She'd just give you the biggest kiss you ever saw- and a big hug, too! That's how much she loves you.

And even though they've put her in a Home (it's for my own good, I know) and she can't come round to see you like she used to, writing you this letter makes her feel so *close* to you. Why, so close I think I'll just reach out and tickle your little chinny-chin-chin! There! How does snookums like being tickled under his chinny-chin-chin?

I remember the last time I saw you-I'm *sure* it wasn't very long ago-you were just the eentsy-weentsiest little baby, all swaddled up in your Baby-Sheath and looking ever so hug- gable! You were smiling in your sleep, with nothing but your precious little head sticking out of the top of the plastic like some relic in a museum. Your dear Mommy (God bless her) switched off the vibrator under your crib and went to get your vitamilk bottle, and just as I was leaning over to give you a Great Big Kiss, you woke up and, oh!, did you let out a howl! I guess you'd never *seen* such an oid woman before! (Yes, Willie, your Great Granny is old- so old she sometimes forgets her age.) Well, your Mommy had to come running back from the kitchen to turn the vibrator on again, so you'd stop crying and go back to sleep. She was a little cross with me, I'm afraid, and I felt sorry that I'd scared you, really I did. I'd only meant to kiss you Now I'm in this Home, and I won't be able to come visit you any more. But maybe after you've read this letter, you'll come visit me! Won't that be fun!

But oh, Willie, your Great-Granny forgets. You *ain't* read this letter-I mean, not now, the 17th of Sept, 2039. You haven't learned to read yet! I'm sure you're nowhere *near* three years old.. .When I was a little girl, no one knew how to read before they were at least five or six-or even seven. Children nowadays are so smart, they being able to read much *sooner* than we did! Why, I'll bet my little Willie is reading and writing and multiplying and dividing by the time he's two-and-a-half, just like all my other Great-Grandchildren! There must be nearly a dozen of them by now. Funny that you're the only one I remember; I guess that's because yours is the only picture they've let me keep.

But it's a *lovely* picture, Willie, snookums, and I don't *care* if you're too itty-bitty to read this now. I have such important news for you that I'm going to write it anyway, and Mommy and Daddy (bless their hearts) can save it for you till you're old enough to read it.

But they're not allowed to read it themselves. This is *your* letter, Willie, and it's just for you. No Grown-Ups Allowed! That's because what I have to tell you concerns those shiny metal Helmets your Mommy and Daddy wear-and why they make Great-Granny Afraid.

Maybe they frighten you, too, those Helmets; I think if they'd had such things when *I* was little, *I'd* have been frightened... But that was ever so many years ago, and I'm growing a little forgetful.

Or maybe you don't even think about the Helmets at all; maybe you just "take them for granted," precious-that means not noticing things-because Mommy and Daddy wear them all the time, and you've never seen them with their Helmets off.

Or maybe you think they're pretty. Yes, that's it, you think, *What pretty Helmets!* (And they are pretty, too, snookums, especially when they're freshly polished. But they're not as pretty as a certain baby I know!) You'd like to wear one of those pretty Helmets yourself, am I right? You can hardly wait for the Big Day to arrive when, five years old, you're taken on a Little Trip to the Clinic and come back wearing a Helmet of your own, just like Mommy and Daddy (God bless them) and all the other big people.

Why, I'll bet you're counting the days till your Fifth Birthday!

(That's true, isn't it, snookums? Don't tell me you're five already. No, please don't tell me that! If I recollect, you should be. Still a little baby. Five is a long way off, isn't it? Sure it is. You'll be reading this long before you're five. I know that because I know what a Smart Baby you are!)

But Willie, precious, even though you're so looking forward to that Little Trip, even though you want a Helmet of your. own more than anything in the world, please listen to what your Great-Granny has to say-because you know your Great-Granny loves you, even if she did make you cry that time,

and you know her only thought is what's best for you. Willie, precious, don't let them put one of those Helmets on you. They aren't good for you. You can trust Great-Granny, Great-Granny knows. Don't go with Mommy and Daddy when they take you down to the Clinic. There are men there who will hurt you, Willie. Great-Granny knows.

Instead, a few days before your Fifth Birthday, sneak out of the house and don't tell Mommy and Daddy where you're going. Put some food in your pockets, in case you get hungry. Maybe you could run away and come live with Great-Granny at the Home, wouldn't that be fun? Wouldn't you like to live here with me? They take very good care of you here, it's always quiet and there's plenty of heat in the winter. And I'd give you all the candy and cake you wanted, even for breakfast. I promise, Willie. Cross my heart.

But the important thing, precious, is not to tell Mommy and Daddy about this part of the letter. Don't tell them what I'm saying here. And most of all, don't tell them you're going to run away before the Big Day. That way, no one will know but you and me. And then we'll have a Secret! Secrets are fun-but only if you don't tell anybody about them. Then. Why, then it wouldn't be a Secret any more!

A Secret is much more fun than a Helmet, "Willie. Helmets are no good for you. *I know* you want one, *I know* they look pretty, but you mustn't let Mommy and Daddy take you to the Clinic. They love you, Willie, but I'll bet you a giant chocolate cake with candy, flowers, and five birthday candles that they don't love you as much as Great-Granny does. They mean well, but they don't know what's best for you.

Great-Granny does. I'm no years old (or was the last time I looked) and they say I'm getting a little senile, but I know a thing or two. I know why more people are going to the movies than ever before-and why no more movies are being made. I know why people in this country walk around smiling-and why all the other countries laugh at us. Oh yes, I know a thing or two.

I also know what Feb 24th is. That's right, Willie, it's Keyes Day, the day of the big Treasure Hunt-aren't you the smart one! But I'll bet you don't know what it *really* is. I'll bet you think the same as every other child, that Keyes Day is when Mommy and Daddy hide little gifts around the house, locked

inside closets and boxes and drawers, then give you a set of keys and turn you loose.

But Keyes Day means more than just getting presents. It's a very special holiday, for it celebrates the birthday of Alonzo Keyes. (Isn't that a funny name? I think William is so much prettier!)

And because Great-Granny knows that you like stories- of course you do, snookums, all children like stories-she's going to tell you one about Alonzo Keyes.

Story-Time, snookums.

Once upon a time there was a young man named Alonzo who lived on an island named Trinidad, where he spent all day playing with his pets. His pets were called guinea pigs, but they weren't *real* pigs, and they didn't go "oink oink!" They were fat, furry little things, like hamsters, only bigger, and Alonzo liked nothing better than watching them as they scampered around their cage, feeding them all sorts of delicious food and teaching them the most wonderful tricks. He taught them to find their way through long, twisty tunnels, and to ring a bell when they got thirsty, and to guess which trapdoor led to their supper.

Alonzo was what was called a Brain Researcher.

You know what a brain is, don't you, precious? It's the lump of meat that fills the inside of your head, and it's what hurts when you try too hard to remember something that happened long ago. It's colored grey and wrinkled all over like a soyburger, but the really strange thing is that, just as people's faces wrinkle as they grow older, so do their brains. My face and brain are very, very wrinkled.

Every morning Alonzo used to look inside the brains of his pets. I'm sorry to say that, to do this, he usually had to cut them open, but I'm sure he did it in a nice way. Sometimes he also had to give his pets injections in their brains. (Injection means sticking someone with a needle, and then squirting some sort of drug into the hole you've made. When I was a girl I was very scared of needles; but they don't use them any more, not even for sewing-in

fact, I'll bet you've never even seen a needle-so don't go having Nightmares. Nightmares-yes, that's something else brains are good for.)

Alonzo was brown as a walnut and very, very smart. He worked in a building called a la- boratory-a little red-brick building filled with glasses and cages and needles on the inside and with palm trees on the outside-where he spent his time teaching his guinea pigs so many wonderful tricks that they'd forget the ones they'd learned the week before. Then he would inject different sorts of drugs into their brains to see which ones helped them remember the trick they'd forgotten.

Alonzo was working on a Memory Drug.

So far, he hadn't found a single one that worked.

Some people thought that Alonzo was doing all this for A Good Cause: if he could find a way for guinea pigs to remember their old tricks, he could find a way for people to do the same. But the truth was, he was doing all this for Money-that is, he was getting an allowance, just like, some day, *you'll* get an allowance.

Your allowance, though, will come from Daddy or, better yet, from me. (I'll start giving you things just as soon as you come live with me here in the Home.) Alonzo's allowance, though, came from a group of men called the Trinidad Police Department. You know what Police are, don't you, snookums? They're men dressed in blue sunsuits who hit people who are bad. You've seen them on TV, and if you'd lived thirty years ago you'd have seen them on the street.

The Chief of the Trinidad Police Department-the Daddy of the Department, the man who told everyone else what to do-was a fat black man named Jubal. Jubal's tummy was so big that he always had to sleep on his back; if he'd tried to sleep on his tummy, or so the story goes, he would have tipped back and forth like an old-time rocking horse, a kind of wooden toy. Jubal loved to eat more than anything else in the world, and I'm sure he always cleaned his plate. Next to food, he loved his wife; for unlike him, Mrs. Jubal was thin and very pretty. Everyone on the island thought so, in fact. So did Alonzo.

The Memory Drug was Jubal's idea; he decided that, if the men in the laboratory could make him such a drug, it would help in his Police work by making it easier to catch Criminals. (A Criminal is a grown-up who does something naughty; the only place you can see them now is on TV, along with Police.) When the Police caught a Criminal, they would hit him; but before they could catch him they had to know what he looked like. Sometimes, when a Criminal did something naughty, other people might see him do it; but after a few days they'd quite often forget they'd seen, and if they saw the Criminal again they might not know him. Jubal wondered if a drug might not help people remember, and he set Alonzo to work finding out.

This very thing had once happened to Jubal himself: he had seen a Criminal with his very own eyes and, only a few days later, had forgotten what the man looked like. His memory must not have been very good; though of course, the whole thing had happened in the dark. It seems that Jubal had walked, or rather, rolled into his bedroom late one night, long after his wife was asleep, and in the moonlight pouring through the curtains he'd seen the dark shape of a man standing over his wife's bed. The man looked as if he'd just given Mrs. Jubal a Big Hug and a Kiss. When Jubal yelled, the man scampered across the room and climbed out the window-but not before Jubal saw, for barely a second, his face outlined in the moonlight.

Mrs. Jubal told everyone she'd been fast asleep, and hadn't seen the Criminal. Jubal wondered if maybe she was Telling a Fib.. .But anyway, he knew he wouldn't need his wife's help- not if Alonzo came up with his Memory Drug.

But Alonzo wasn't coming up with the drug. He worked hard, injecting the brains of guinea pig after guinea pig-yet maybe he didn't work hard enough.

True, if he found the drug, it would make him rich and famous, and Alonzo very much wanted to be rich and famous; he wanted people to point and stare, to know his name, to smile at him. And above all he wanted Mrs. Jubal to smile at him.

But it was Mr. Jubal he was worried about. He didn't want Mr. Jubal to point and stare, he didn't even want Mr. Jubal to look at him too closely.

Because you see, precious, Alonzo had been the man in the Jubals' bedroom, and Mr. Jubal was the only one who didn't know it.

Alonzo went on testing drugs, but he never found the one he'd been paid to find-or if he did, he poured it down the sink. His guinea pigs remained as forgetful as an old woman.

He did find a drug, though, that had a very interesting effect: it made his guinea pigs forget even more.

Remember what I said about the brain, snookums? How it looks as wrinkled as a lump of grey soyburger? (Sure you do, *your* memory's OK!) Well, even though everyone's soyburger is special and belongs to them alone, they're all just about the same shape and have wrinkles in just about the same places. And there's one certain place, a little lump on a bigger one, where everyone has a certain set of wrinkles for remembering things. Do you know what we call it? Why, IT, of course! Isn't that funny? IT is short for a certain Com-pli-cat-ed Name you'll learn when you go to School. (In fact, it will probably be the first thing they teach you, though I didn't learn it-or IT-till much later.) The name is Inferior Temporal Gyrus-that's funny too, isn't it?-and Alonzo found that, when he injected a certain drug into that certain set of wrinkles, IT, and then stuck two wires into the hole and did a certain Com-pli-cat-ed Thing to them (sort of like touching them to a wall socket; do you know what E-lec-tric-i-ty is?), he could make his little pets forget the trick they'd just learned.

He called it "snuffing a memory," and it worked almost every time.

As for the drug, he called it simply Number 57, which we sometimes write like this: #57. (That little tic-tac-toe. board means Number.) He'd been searching for a Memory Drug, but even though #57 was exactly the opposite, a Forgetfulness Drug, Alonzo decided that it had its uses.

He didn't tell anyone about what he'd found; he worked alone for the rest of the year. Then, on New Year's Eve, just as 1976 was turning into 1977, he brought a batch of # 57 to the Chief of Police.

The Jubals were in the middle of having a Big Party, and the house was filled with Policemen and their wives. There were broken bottles everywhere-bottles that had once held a certain kind of old-time drink called Rum-and everyone was doing the thing he liked best: the Policemen were drinking Rum and laughing and fighting, their wives were drinking Rum and laughing and talking, Mrs. Jubal was dancing, and Jubal himself was in the kitchen doing his own Favorite Thing, which was eating his New Year's Dinner. There was too much food for even a man as big as Jubal to eat, but he didn't mean to eat it all himself. Every year at this time he would stuff himself full of goose and chicken and pork and lamb and other precious meats that today only kings can eat; and after he had stuffed himself just as full as a soysausa- ge, he would give what was left over to his guests.

After saying hello to Mrs. Jubal, and giving her a Little Wink (can you close just one eye at a time?), Alonzo went into the kitchen where Mr. Jubal was busy eating, and showed him the #57. I'm afraid, though, that he Told a Fib: he told Jubal that #57 would help him remember the man in the bedroom.

The Chief of Police asked Alonzo to pour some of the drug into the tall glass of Rum he was drinking, and Alonzo did as he was told. He also taped some wires to the man's head and ran them to a little machine he had made. Jubal drank his glass of Rum, just like a Good Little Boy drinking his vitamilk, and then nodded to Alonzo, who pressed a little button on his machine. All of a sudden Jubal's eyes closed, his mouth hung open, and he hiccupped. Alonzo let go of the little button, and the man's eyes opened again.

"What am I doing here?" he asked. "And what are these wires on my head?"

"You're just sitting down to your New Year's Dinner," said Alonzo. "Don't you remember? You'd been waiting so long for it that you fainted from hunger. These wires brought you back."

"Well, leave them on," said the Chief of Police. "I don't want to faint again, I want to *eat*" He reached for a leg of lamb with one hand and his glass of

Rum with the other. The glass was empty, but Alonzo quickly filled it with Rum and #57.

As Alonzo watched, Jubal ate till he could eat no more. "Strange," he said, blinking, "I seem to get filled up faster than I used to." Alonzo pressed the little button, and again the Chief's eyes closed, his mouth hung open, and he hiccupped. When he awoke again, Alonzo told him the same story and refilled his glass. Once more the Chief began to eat his New Year's Dinner.

An hour later, as the New Year was almost upon them, the people in the next room heard a loud crash, followed by the tinkling of breaking glass. They rushed into the kitchen to find Alonzo bent over the shape on the floor; he seemed to be reading the dial of a little machine from which two wires dangled.

"Just as I thought," said Alonzo, and shook his head. He put the machine in his pocket without letting anyone see it. "We're too late, friends. The man's dead."

He was right. Indeed, Jubal had split open like an overstuffed soysausage. He had eaten himself to death.

And that, snookums, is the story of Alonzo Keyes. Please don't let it frighten you. I do hope, though, you can learn something from it: A Good Boy Always Cleans His Plate, but he doesn't make a pig of himself.

Death? You don't know what Death means? Not now, precious.

I wish his story ended here, but I'm sorry to say that Alonzo Keyes went on to marry Mrs. Jubal. He put aside his guinea pigs and brain machines and lived happily-but not happily ever after. Within a few years, Alonzo and Mrs. Jubal took to fighting, and with great bitterness and gloom they decided to break up. The entire marriage had been a Mistake.

It was Mrs. Jubal's idea to bring out the old machine and the #57; she thought that all her sadness could be erased if, somehow, Alonzo could make her forget that she'd ever seen him. Alonzo agreed; it seemed like a fine idea, and after "snuffing" their memories of the marriage, they could go

their own ways without regret. So right away he cooked up some #57 on the kitchen stove, took out the little machine and gave it a few adjustments (that means turning the knobs an eentsy-weentsy bit). Then he and his wife sat down on the living room sofa, drank a glass of the drug, and fitted the wires to their heads. After giving his wife one last kiss and one last punch in the mouth, Alonzo pressed the button.

The machine worked. Both closed their eyes, sagged to the floor, and hiccupped. The wires fell away, and when they awoke they didn't know one another.

But Alonzo had made A Bad Mistake: he'd forgotten that people tend to repeat their *own* Bad Mistakes. As soon as he came to his senses and saw the beautiful stranger on the floor beside him, he immediately fell in love with her all over again.

Can you guess what happened, snookums? That's right: they got married, and then broke up, and then erased their memories of the marriage, and then got married again, and then. Well, it took Alonzo almost twenty years to realize what had happened.

When he did, he took the #57 and the wonderful machines and put them On the Market; that means he put together a lot and left them in stores for people to buy. Once again it seemed he had done it for A Good Cause: he went on TV and told everyone that, used correctly, his little machines could cure Troubled Thoughts. He saw the day, he said, when every Clinic and Home would have one, and they would be used to make people happy-people who were worried and fearful and full of regrets for things that had happened in the past. (Sometimes, you see, a memory gets "locked away" deep inside us like a Keyes Day Treasure Hunt, and it makes us go a little funny in the head years later. A boy whose Mommy had made fun of him while he was learning to talk might, years later, have a Stutter, a kind of shivering, on certain words. A woman whose Daddy had hit her when she was little might, years later, find it hard to fall in love. Alonzo thought his machines could help people like this by "snuffing out" the unhappy memories.)

But once again he'd made A Bad Mistake. People went out and bought them, but not to cure their Troubled Thoughts. They bought them, rather, as a toy. Correctly adjusted, with the drug taken at just the right time and in just the right amounts, the machines could be made to snuff the tiniest and most recent memories. It gave many people the chance they had been looking for all their lives: to repeat, as if for the first time, whatever they liked best. A young girl whose happiest moments had been the first time she sat through *Gone With the Wind* (a popular movie which I'm sure you'll see some day) could sit through it again-for the first time. A man who liked reading could select his favorite book and, after correctly adjusting the machine, could read it again as if it were brand new.

There had never been anything like this before. Once upon a time, people used to "drink to forget." That meant that they drank glasses of Rum, just like Jubal, and for an hour or two could escape from the past. But suddenly, overnight, everyone was drinking #57-and Rum itself was forgotten. There had even been a Rum-drinkers' club (it was known as the AA) where, night after night, sad people met and talked about their Troubled Thoughts. Now it changed its name to the Nepenthe Society. People came for just one night and went home cured.

As you might expect-since the drug's first use had been to commit a Murder, a terrible thing, Willie-Criminals immediately saw the drug as a useful tool. A Criminal would walk into a shop, force the shopkeeper to give him all the Money in his Money-box (which was called a Cash Register), and then make the man forget he'd just been robbed. The poor shopkeeper would go about his day, never thinking to call in the Police, and only that night-after he'd looked inside his Cash Register-would he know that a Criminal had visited him.

(Finally somebody very very smart went to the Police with A Good Idea: whenever they caught a Criminal, instead of hitting him they would simply snuff the man's whole past away. He would forget all the people and places that had taught him to become a Criminal, and would, in fact, become a little child again-a child who could be trained in Good Habits the way Alonzo had trained his guinea pigs)

Those were memorable days, those first days of the Forgetfulness Drug.

I, too, was caught up in the craze, and so was my husband, your dear Great-Grandaddy (God bless him). We were much younger then, and saw no danger. We returned to Paris, a beautiful city in another country, and there we visited a certain garden named Versailles-a garden we had always loved because we'd spent the day after our wedding there. As we walked the broad paths, passing statues buried in greenery and bushes in the shapes of animals, gazing at ourselves in the reflecting pools and dodging the spray from the fountains, we knew somehow that we'd done it all before that much the machine had not erased-yet it was just as wonderful as if it were the first time. Once again we thrilled to the vistas; once again we felt the vague Presence wherever we walked.

Pardon me, Willie. Great-Granny does go on. It's you I should be thinking of. ..I see I've written of the Presence.

That's not the same as Presents, Willie, like the kind you get for Keyes Day, the kind I'll give you when you come visit me. I mean that your Great-Grandaddy and I had the feeling we were being watched by Something.

Well, Something was watching us *all*, I guess, because less than a month after Alonzo's machines came out in the stores, The Government passed a law calling #57 a Dangerous Drug and stopping sales of the wonderful machines. (If you want to know what The Government is, snookums, I'll tell you when you get here. Don't ask Daddy about it, he doesn't know. He'll only Tell you a Fib.) Policemen went from house to house searching for machines that had already been sold; most of them were taken and melted down like oleo on a slice of soy- toast, and the drug was dumped into the ocean. But your Great-Grandaddy (bless his heart) unscrewed the machine into little pieces and hid them inside our TV set, where they looked like they belonged, and he poured the #57 over an aspidistra plant we had in the bedroom, where it seeped through the soil and collected in a little puddle at the bottom of the dish long after the Policemen had gone.

We weren't the only ones who found a way to "save our snuffer" (as the machines came to be called). Many others did, too, and some men even made their own machines and drugs in their basements. I guess it wasn't so very hard to do.

So when The Government saw that its laws weren't working, and that Alonzo's snuffers were themselves hard to snuff, it quickly passed some new laws saying that people *were* allowed to own snuffers-but only if they bought them from The Government.

The ones The Government made were much better than Alonzo's; all you had to do was press them against your head, and there was no drug to worry about. The snuffer did it all.

Soon the new snuffers became as popular as TV and as common as cars. Everybody owned one-everybody, that is, but your Great-Grandaddy (God bless him) and me. Some might say he was too cheap to buy the new model-I'm sure that's what your Mommy and Daddy would tell you- but the truth is, he just plain didn't trust The Government.

In a way, I think he may have been right. There was something very funny about those snuffers.. .They'd been On the Market for a year or two, and suddenly they all began breaking down. People had to take them to be repaired - you know, the way a man comes to fix the air-conditioner - only the repairs weren't made at offices. No, you had to take your broken snuffer somewhere else.

To a Clinic.

And when you came back, you'd be *wearing* the snuffer.

The new models, it seems, were made to fit over the head, covering all the hair, like the chromium Helmets your Mommy and Daddy wear. This way, it is easier for people to. have their snuffer with them all the time. And that's just the way people wanted it; they liked to keep their Helmets on all day and all night, when they were handy for snuffing out Nightmares.

In short, SF had become a way of life.

(Some people think SF stands for Snuffers. It doesn't. It stands for Selective Forgetfulness, which is what Snuffers are for.)

And it's still a way of life today. Thanks to SF, certain books have become amazingly popular; others have been left to crumble into dust. People find the book they like best and spend all their time reading it, over and over, snuffing out each previous reading. The Classics are doing well, and so is something we call Adult Fiction, which means they are written for lonely people. Mysteries are doing best of all; every home and Home, it seems, has a copy of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. I know it's a big favorite with your Mommy and Daddy-I remember seeing a copy of the special plastic-coated "Indestructo Edition" at your house and maybe some day it will be a favorite of yours. I hope, though, that you choose to read it only once.

As your Great-Grandaddy used to say, SF has made it possible for a man to find a well- thumbed book on bis bookshelf, a book almost falling apart from years and years of reading, a book he knows he's read dozens of times, and studied dozens of times, and discussed, and written in the margins, and loved-and still not remember ever having read it.

A funny feeling, right, snookums?

Most people, of course, don't have bookshelves any more. After all, they own only one book. That's all they'll ever need.

In movies the same thing has happened, only worse, since reading's too hard for many people. Young men and women quit their jobs and spend all day in downtown movie theaters, growing pale, living on popcorn and orange drink, watching the same film again and again, reel after reel, until they sicken or starve.

And there's no longer any question of spending time and money on a film that turns out to be bad; there are no more unhappy surprises. All the uncertainty has been taken out of it, and whenever people go to the movies, they know they're going to see their favorite film. There's no further need for new films, and no interest in them. No one's made a film in years; the Old Greats are good enough.

TV has been even crazier, maybe because each part of the country has its own choice. In Birmingham, England, episode #114 of *Coronation Street* was at one time shown every day for more than a year, and no one

complained. But the record goes to the citizens of Calhoun County, Arkansas, who voted twenty-six years ago to have a favorite segment of *I Love Lucy*- "Lucy Buys a Dachshund"-shown every morning, seven days a week, re-run after re-run.

You guessed it, snookums. It's still on the air.

Live-action sports were hard-hit, too; men have taken to watching "instant replays" of their favorite football games on TV. There was even a terrible tragedy many years ago (that means something that ends badly) during the National Crew Races of 2024. During a crew race, Willie, eight men sit in a long thin rowboat and row as fast as they can, while a ninth man cheers them on. And in the Races of 2024 the men *did* row as fast as they could-nine times, after which six men on one crew and four on the other died of heart attacks. It seems the audience was so excited by the Races that they snuffed them, and persuaded the crews to do the same. The men in the boats couldn't understand why, the sixth and seventh and eighth times around, the Race seemed so *tiring*...

Of course, Bad Mistakes like that had to be stopped, and they were. People have learned to be more careful. And then, a lot of things, such as music, seem almost unchanged.

People listen to good music-and bad music-pretty much as they did before SF. The reason, I guess, is that music depends on repetition to be enjoyed; that means hearing it over and over, snookums. I'll bet you didn't like your Nursery Rhymes the very first time you heard them.

Though, of course, there are certain pieces that call for snuffing. The most popular is something by a man named Haydn; it's called *The Surprise Symphony.*

As you can see, everything has slowed down; in fact, we're standing still. People are too busy re-living the favorite days of their pasts to worry about the future. When someone asks, "What's new?" there's only one answer: "Nothing."

And it's been this way for. For twenty, thirty years now. Oh, snookums, it's been awful! The past was never like this! We're in a kind of Living Death. (It's not necessary that you know what Death means, snookums.)

The rest of the world smiles at us and shakes their heads, yet The Government doesn't seem to care. I guess they're happy they've been re-elected time and again for the past two decades. (All this may be too com-pli-cat-ed for you, Willie, but I simply mean, everyone seems to like The Government now.)

I've never voted for them myself; and now, of course, they won't let me, because I'm no. Your Great-Grandaddy (God bless him) never voted for them either. I wonder what he'd say if he were alive today.

No, we didn't vote. But then, neither of us ever wore the Helmets. Everyone else bought them, but we were.

Afraid, I guess. Those Helmets don't work right. They snuff things even when nobody's asked them to, as if Someone Else is holding the switch. And so people these days seem to forget things you'd think they'd want to remember. Like the time The Government promised all that money for the cities, and the cure for cancer, and the solar energy plants in every county. (That meant that your air-conditioner would work whenever the sun shined on your house.)

The Government seemed to forget those promises-but all the people did, too. All the people with Helmets, that is. They were busy watching *TV Greats* and *The Classics Hour*. I'd tell your Mommy and Daddy about the Mayor's promise to leave office six years ago, to "give someone else a chance"-and they'd only smile and vote for him again.

That's one reason I'm afraid of the Helmets. Oh, please don't think I'm just an old scaredy-cat, Willie; it's *you* I'm afraid for. I don't want you to make that Little Trip to the Clinic, and I'm so glad it won't happen till you're five. (Someone here at the Home said that, soon, children will be fitted with Helmets when they're born, and I said I didn't see how that could be true, because during the first five years the head grows too fast. But she said it'll be a new kind of Helmet that grows right along with it.)

That means that, some day, *everyone* will wear a Helmet. But not me, I don't want one and I don't need one. I still have our old machine, the first one we bought, and what',s left of Alonzo's #57, and sometimes, when the need is great, I take it out. But I only use it for Very Special Things, precious. Harmless Things. Like the time someone (I forget who) died-some- one I must have loved-and I wanted to erase the pain from my memory.

Sometimes the need is very great.

But I've never worn one of the Helmets. They frighten me. And I wish they frightened you as well. Listen and I'll tell you another Secret: I know why your Mommy and Daddy never take their Helmets off.

They can't get them off. The Helmets are part of their heads.

It's true, I know it's true. A few days before they put me in this Home, I saw a man jump from the roof of his building. He fell toward the sidewalk, ten floors down. He fell on his head. And when it hit the sidewalk, the Helmet cracked open, and there was no head under it, so that everything that was inside ran out, and the wires were exposed.

So Willie, precious, please come visit Great-Granny before your Trip to the Clinic. Please come to the Home and live here with me, I won't let them find you, and I'll let you try out my # 57 and that will be good enough.

I'm so glad I've written you this letter, teaching you, warning you, scaring you, perhaps, but that's all to the good, because it means you'll come to me. Writing has made me feel so close to you, but it's nothing like having you here with me would be. Having you here safe with your old GreatGranny who loves you so dearly. I'd give you all the cookies and cake you could eat, I'd even let you try the # 57, it will be good enough.

Sorry, snookums. Great-Granny repeats herself.

I'll end here, praying for your reply, and I'll be waiting, even if it takes years.

Your loving Great-Granny

Fri 18 Sept '39

Willie, precious,

How's my little snookums? How's my snookums today? As happy as I am? I hope so, because I'm sure there's never *been* such a wonderful day! I woke up this morning feeling like a young girl again, and when I looked at your picture above my bed, and the rain beating against my window, there were tears of happiness in my eyes.

And do you know why, precious? Because today I've decided to sit down and write you a letter. Imagine, Willie, a letter of your very own! Baby's First Letter!

There's so much I have to tell you, and I'm so excited I can hardly begin. Why, I don't *remember* the last time I felt so good.

Petey

'Let's face it, Doctor, if an inmate's suicidal there ain't a hell of a lot you can do. Sure, you can take away his shoes so he don't strangle himself with his shoelaces, and you take away his clothes for the same reason. I once seen a man hanging from the bars on his window by his T-shirt-and maybe just to be safe you take the cot out of his room, since last year we had a broad who slashed her wrists on the spyings....

"But you can't do everything. I mean, if they want to kill themselves they're gonna figure out a way to do it. We once had a guy who ran against the wall with his head. A nine-by-seven cell, that's all it was, so he couldn't build up much speed… Still, he gave himself a pretty nice concussion. Put a nice dent in the plaster, too. Now, of course, we keep the place padded And another one we had, I swear to God he just held his breath till he croaked. I mean it, if they've got the will they can do it.

"Now the guy you're gonna see, he had us fooled. We thought we'd took every precaution with him, you know? But we should've used a straitjacket. Christ, the guy really tore hell out of his throat. With his bare hands yet.

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"George, I've got to admit it: I'm jealous, I really am. This place is fantastic." Milton raised his glass." Here's to you, you old son of a bitch! And to your new house."

He was about to down his Scotch, but Ellie stayed his hand.

"Honey, wait. Let's let everybody in on it." She turned to the other guests, who were gathered in little clumps of conversation throughout the living room." Hey, everybody! Can I have your attention, please? My husband has just proposed a toast to our charming host and hostess..." She waited for silence.

"And to their bountiful kindness in letting us peasants"

"Peons, Ellie, peons!" shouted Walter. Like the rest of them, he was already rather drunk.

"Yeah," echoed Harold, "us miserable peons!"

"Okay," Ellie laughed." To their bountiful kindness in opening their new home-"

"Their stately new home."

"Their mansion!"

"For opening their mansion to us poor miserable downtrodden peons. And furthermore-"

"Hey," interrupted her husband, "I thought I was going to make the toast!" They all laughed." I mean I've been practicing for this all week!" He turned to the rest, milking the joke." I tell you, the old lady doesn't let me get a word in edgewise anymore!"

"Yeah, come on, El," shouted Walter, "give the poor guy a chance, and then you can put the muzzle back on!"

Everyone laughed except Walter's wife, Joyce, who whispered, "Really, honey, I sometimes think it's you that needs-"

"Ladies and gentlemen." Milton spoke with mock gravity." I hereby propose a toast to our esteemed host-"

All eyes turned toward George, who grinned and made a low bow. "-and to Phyllis, our equally esteemed hostess-"

"Gee, Ellie, you've really got him trained, haven't you!"

"I freely admit it," said Milton, placing the hand with the drink over his heart. After twenty-eight years"

"Twenty-seven."

"It just feels like twenty-eight!"

" Oh, Waltie, hush up."

"After twenty-seven years of wedded bliss, she's finally done it. She's even got me making my own bed!" He paused for the cheers and the groans, then turned toward Phyllis. "But as I was saying, I would like to pay tribute to that gracious, charming, ravishingly beauti-", Phyllis tittered, "-stunningly coiffured-"

Self-consciously she patted the streaks in her new feathercut, "-and delightfully sexy woman he calls his wife."

"I'll drink to that!"

"Hear hear!"

"You're allowed to drink to that too, Phyllis."

"Yeah, somebody mix Phyllis a drink."

"Oh, that's silly!" squealed Phyllis." I'm not supposed to drink to myself"

"Nonsense, my dear." George handed her a vodka and tonic, then seized his own.

"And finally," continued Milton, raising his voice and his glass, "to the reason we're all gathered here tonight, the cause of all our celebration-"

" And jealousy," added his wife.

"To this beautiful, beautiful house, this rustic retreat nestled amidst the wilds of Connecticut, this find of a lifetime, which makes our own split-levels look like something out of Levittown "You're laying it on a bit thick," said George. He winked at the others ." I think Milt missed his true calling. He should have been a poet, not a stockbroker."

"Or a real estate salesman!" cried Walter.

Milton continued undaunted. "This museum-"

"Museum?" George winced; all this congratulation embarrassed him. He could sense the envy in it, and the bitterness. "Mausoleum is more like it!"

"-containing room after room of the rarest antiquities-"

"Junk! Nothing but junk!"

"-this magnificent Colonial mansion-"

"Aw, come on, Milt! It's just an old barn, for Chrissake!"

"-in which George can play country squire and Phyllis lady of the manor, to their hearts' content-"

George laughed. "I've still got to drive to work every day!"

"-this baronial hall, this playground of the landed gentry, this irrefutable testament to the smartest real estate finagling this side of Manhattan Island-
"

George's smile faded.

"-this glorious old homestead, now a new home for George and Phyllis, in the hope that their years are blessed with just as much luck as they've had in acquiring it."

There was a moment's uneasy silence.

"Are you done, Milt?" said George.

"That's right, old buddy." Milton downed his Scotch. The others followed with a round of applause, but it was a feeble one; George's embarrassment embarrassed them all. Then Walter yelled out, "And in the hope that you'll give lots more parties like this one! How about every weekend, for starters?" And that relaxed them into laughter, though a little too loud, a little too long.

"When are you gonna show us the rest of this place?" cried Sidney Gerdts.

"Yeah, when do we get a tour of the estate? That's what we came for!"

"Come on, Phyl, you promised."

"She's been talking about this place for the last six months!"

"Yeah, you really had us drooling."

"So what does she do now? Keeps us cooped up in this living room like a bunch of kids!"

"How about it, Phyl? What 're you ashamed of?"

Phyllis smiled." The tour starts when everybody gets here."

"Isn't everybody here?"

"Who's missing?"

"Herb and Tammie Rosenzweig haven't shown up yet," said George." They told me they'd be able to make it…

"I think maybe they were having some trouble finding a sitter," said Doris, Sidney's wife." I spoke to them this morning."

Harold made a face." Aw, they're always late. It takes Tammie two hours to put on her makeup." He shuffled toward the bar and poured himself another whiskey and soda.

" Let's start without'em, then."

"Now, Sid, really," said Doris, taking him by the hand, "you know that wouldn't be fair. Come on, let's go over and look at these." She pulled him toward a wall of bookshelves." Maybe you can reach the ones on the top. They're too high for me."

"Aw, gee, honey, they're just a lot of old books. Kid stuff, too, from the look of them. Fairy tales. Probably came with the house."

"But they look interesting, those big ones up there. Maybe they're worth a lot of money."

Grunting, he stood on tiptoe and removed one, a heavy volume shedding flakes of leather when he opened it, like a dead man's skin.

"Here, you take it. I can't read this stuff." He handed the book to his wife and turned away, bored.

Squinting at the text, Doris frowned in disappointment." oh, damn," she muttered, "wouldn't you just know it?"

George left off talking business with Fred Weingast and ambled over, glass in hand." Having trouble, Dorie?"

She grimaced." This really makes me feel my age. I used to be so good in French-even knew a word or two of Provengal, which I think this book is in-and now I don't remember a thing."

"Never could stand it, myself. All that masculine-feminine stuff, and those goddamn accents…" He took a sip of vodka." Actually, I'd toss all these old books out, only they're a good investment."

Gerdts turned back to them." Investment, did you say? You mean those things are really worth something?"

"Damn right. They're going up all the time." He nodded to the man who stood talking a few feet away." Isn't that right, Fred?"

Weingast walked over, followed by Harold and another guest, Arthur Faschman." Yeah, my accountant told me to get into books, especially with the market the way it is. But you've gotta have the room for 'em."

He shrugged. "Me, my apartment's much too small."

"Naw, that's not the problem," said Faschman." The problem is keeping them cool and dry. Look at those things up there-they're probably full of mice and silverfish."

George laughed, a little uneasily." Oh, I doubt there's any mice. We had the place fumigated before moving in. Really fumigated!" He took a sip of vodka." But you know, you're right, those damned things do decay something awful, and when summer comes I bet they'll begin to smell. To tell you the truth, I've been thinking of selling the lot of them to some place down in New Haven. Maybe put in a nice hi-fi unit, or one of those new Betamax things."

"Yeah, that's a good idea," said Faschman." I've been meaning to get one of those myself. And I'll tell you what you do then: you invest in stamps. They're a lot easier to keep."

Weingast nodded." Stamps are okay," he said, "but my accountant says coins are eye better. With gold prices going up, they're a pretty safe bet."

When George left them, the men were deep into high finance. He returned to the bar and refilled his glass.

Even with the Rosenzweigs' tardiness, and the absence of the Foglers and the Greens, and the fact that Bob Childs was sick and Evelyn Platt was away, it was a big housewarming party. The Brackmans were there, Milt and Ellie, and the Gerdtses, Sid and Doris, and Arthur and Judy Faschman, and Fred and Laura Weingast, and the Stanleys just back from Miami, Dennis and Sarah sporting their new suntans, and Harold and Frances Lazarus, and big Mike Carlinsky with his fiancé, whose name they all kept forgetting, and Phil and Mimi Katz, and the Chasens, Chuck and Cindy, and Walter Applebaum and his new wife, Joyce, and Steve and Janet Mulholland, and Jack and Irene Crystal, and the Fitzgeralds and the Goodhues, and Allen Goldberg and Paul Strauss and poor Cissy Hawkins, who was so homely Allen and Paul wouldn't talk to her, even though she was supposed to be fixed up with one of them.

Thirty-one people gathered in the Kurtzes' living room; and with the Rosenzweigs arriving now, amid much hugging and handshaking and cries

of "At last!" and "It's about time!" and the inevitable wolf whistles at Tammie Rosenzweig's décolletage, that made thirty-three.

That was a lot of people, George decided. Too many, really, when one considered how many of them weren't even close friends. Why, he and Phyllis barely saw the Mulhollands from one year to the next. And as for the Goodhues, they didn't even know them; they'd been invited by the Fitzgeralds. Leaning back against the bar, George held the glass to his eye and surveyed his guests through a frost of vodka. At times like this it was hard to keep track of them: too many faces to smile at, too many names to remember. Sometimes they seemed almost interchangeable.

Still, it was nice to have a living room large enough to hold a crowd this size. And anyway, George reflected, he and Phyllis had vowed that as soon as they'd moved into the house they'd become great entertainers.

A party like this was the perfect way to establish their new identities.

"George!" Phyllis broke into his reverie." Come over here and take Tommie's coat." She looked up at Herb." And as for you, I think you're a big enough boy to hang your own coat up. It's very informal tonight, we haven't really moved in yet. And you'll have to mix yourselves drinks, we don't even have a bartender!" She laughed, as if to suggest that, in the future, in this fine new house, bartenders would be routine.

Tammie was talking about how hard it was to find a decent sitter these days." And so finally we decided the hell with it, and left her off at Herb's folks. They never go out anymore anyway." She smoothed her new dress.

"Lord, George, this place is swell!" said Herb, pumping George's hand."

I'm just sorry we didn't get here earlier, so we could see it by daylight. Bet those trees are beautiful this time of year. But God almighty, let me tell you, it's hard as hell to find this place!"

"Weren't Phyllis's directions good enough?"

"Oh sure, they were all right." Herb followed George to the coat closet." But I mean, it gets so dark out here in the country. I'm just not used to it." He paused until George had found a spare hanger for Tommie's coat." We took the Turnpike all the way up to New Haventhat part was fine, of course- and we got off at C, just as we were supposed to… But once you're off 81 the road gets pretty bad. It's like they suddenly turned out the lights! No markers or anything." He shook his head." You've got influence on the State Highway Commission, don't you, George? I mean, you really ought to do something about it. It's a disgrace!"

"Yeah, the roads are a little tricky at night, till you get used to them."

"Tricky? They're a lot worse than tricky, let me tell you. I damn near hit something! Honest to God, I think it was a bear."

"Oh, come on, Herb!" George slapped him on the back." You've been living in Yonkers too long. This is the country, sure, but it's not the middle of the woods, for Chrissake! There haven't been bears around here for hundreds of years."

" Well, whatever it was-"

"Probably some poor old sheep dog. All the farmers around here use'em."

"Okay, okay, it was a sheep dog, then. Who knows? It was so dark...

Anyway, I nearly hit the thing, and I would have if Tammie hadn't yelled. And then I got so rattled I missed the turnoff at, what is it, Death's Head?"

George laughed." Brother, you've got some imagination! You Madison Avenue guys are all alike. The name of the town is Beth Head, dummy!

Beth Head."

Herb laughed, too." Anyway, I missed the place completely and ended up driving into the gates of some state park. Can you believe it?

Tammie was having a fit' We're looking for your house and we end up in some damned park!"

"Yeah, that's Chatfield Hollow. I've done some fishing there. Very nice area."

"It must be, during the day. But it's not the kind of place I like to visit at night. Tammie thought she saw a light in the ranger's cabin you know, the one by the gates-and I got out to ask directions. I mean, we hadn't even brought along a goddamned map!"

George grinned from ear to ear." Poor Herb! You'll just never make a backwoodsman!"

"Damned right!" laughed Herb." Tammie was fussing about her goddamned dress so much she didn't even think to… Well, anyway, I'm walking up to this godforsaken little cabin, and immediately I see that Tammie was wrong, there's no light in it, the place is boarded up for the season and all… But just in case, I start pounding on the door, you know?, and yelling for the ranger. I mean, we were really lost!" He lowered his voice." Besides, I knew Tammie would squawk if I didn't make sure it was really empty."

"And was it?"

"Of course it was! Who the hell would hang around a place like that all night?" He shook his head." So there I am, pounding on this door and wondering if there's a pay phone around so maybe I could call you..

...When I hear something lumbering through the bushes."

"Probably the ranger."

"I didn't wait to find out. You should have seen how fast I got back into that car and took off! Believe me, I was ready to head right back to New York, but Tammie wanted to show off her new dress." He paused.

"And of course, I wanted to see this place."

"You tell Tammie what you heard?"

"Are you kidding? She'd make such fun of me I'd never hear the end of it. Listen, she thinks I'm a coward as it is. She's the tough one, she really is. I'd never have found this place if it weren't for her. She caught that last turnoff after I was half a mile past it. The damned thing's almost hidden by trees! You ought to cut a few of them down, for Chrissake!"

"I thought you were supposed to be the big conservationist."

Herb laughed." Well, just because I send money to the Sierra Club doesn't mean I have to worship trees. I mean, someone's going to have an accident one of these days. Really, George, you ought to do something about it. Get them to put up some lights or something. You've got influence with the Highway Commission, don't you?"

"Not as much as people seem to think."

"Well, anyway, it's a safety hazard. I mean, that winding road, so goddamned narrow that I had to go about twenty miles an hour…

It's just a good thing there weren't any cars going the other way. As a matter of fact, there wasn't a single other car on the road. Pretty desolate for a place so close to New York."

"No pollution."

"Damn right! Hey, I mean it, old buddy. I may not be a nature freak, but I think it's great out here. Like to live here myself."

"Why not move, then? There must be a few homesteads for sale in these parts. I know there are a couple in the next county. I could even help you look. I mean, it gets a little lonely, sometimes…

"Hey, I thought you liked living way out here."

"Oh sure, of course I do. Wouldn't trade it for the world. I just mean, we don't have any friends in the area yet, and it'd be nice to have someone nearby."

"Ah, you make friends pretty quick, George. Besides, I could never afford a place like this. I mean, all this land!"

"No, really, it wasn't so bad. Didn't cost much."

"Come on, man! You've got room for a couple of good-sized golf courses out here. And that driveway of yours, it's as long as a country road.

You know, I have to keep reminding how near we are to the city. There's so much land, I'll bet you could go hunting right on your own property. And probably get lost, too."

"Yeah, well, I guess we're really out in the sticks."

"But that's the best part! I mean it, that's just great! That's the whole point of living out here, I can see that now. The seclusion, the solitude… Boy, could I do with some solitude these days!"

"Business pretty rough, huh?"

"Boy, you know it! We're all tightening the belt. How about you?"

"Oh, pretty much the same, I guess."

"Aw, now don't be modest, George. You're always selling yourself short. This place must have cost a pretty penny."

George paused and cleared his throat." Well to tell you the truth, it cost me almost nothing. Got it for a song. The owner went a little you-know -what." He tapped his head.

"Christ! Leave it to you to find the bargains!" They were back in the living room now. Herb gazed around him, taking in the furnishings, the sheer size of the room, the familiar faces of the other guests.

"Oh well, I guess the rest of us will just have to get along with our little shacks in the suburbs!"

"Not me, man," Walter piped up." I'm buying myself an estate just like this one." The others paused in conversation. Walter grinned.

"Just as soon as the market picks up!"

"You'd better watch out, Walt," called Frances." Someday somebody might just take you seriously. You'll run into some real estate sharpie and wind up out in the street, walking around in a barrel!"

Milton moved toward them, staggering slightly, and put his arm around Walter's shoulder. He was very drunk." If you wanna buy some land, you don't hafta wait till the market's better," he said." You just gotta know the right people. Isn't that right, George?"

Under the weight of their curious stares, George managed to maintain his smile-but it was an effort." Oh, you need a little patience, that's all. And you have to wait till the right deal comes along. I was just lucky, I guess." The look he gave Milton was not very pretty.

Phyllis stepped forward, not a moment too soon, and announced gaily, "Well, I don't know about you, but I'm just grateful to be living in a place like this. And now that Herb and Tammie are finally here, I'd like to show you just how lucky we are."

"Well, it's about time," said Ellie. She turned to the rest." She's been keeping us in suspense."

" You mean at long last we'll get to see it?" asked Frances.

"That's right," replied Phyllis, all smiles. She fluttered her eyelids in parody of a Grand Duchess." Madame Kurtz will now escort her guests around her palatial estate."

George managed an apologetic laugh." It's just an old barn," he said.

"Honest-nothing but a barn!"

"See, I got him trussed up pretty tight now. Won't catch me making the same mistake twice, no, sir!"

"Are you sure the straps aren't a little, urn, too tight?"

"You kidding, Doc? If I loosened them things, he'd yip the bandages off in two seconds flat. No, sir, nothing doing.

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The doctor stepped into the room." Well, hello there, " he said genially." I'm sorry to find you like this. Hope you're not terribly uncomfortable. Just as soon as those lacerations heal, we'll remove those bandages and then we'll see if we can't get you out of that jacket, okay? We believe in giving our patients here a second chance.

The man on the bed glared at him.

'And so I do hope that, um- He turned to the orderly." Can he hear what I'm saying?"

"Oh, yeah, he can hear you fine. But we think he mustve done something to his vocal cords, you know? He don't seem able to speak " He smiled "Just between you and me, I ain't so broken up about that. I mean, all that screaming, it was really getting to me. Always going on about feeding time… I mean, you'd think we never fed the guy!"

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"It isn't fair. Honestly, it just isn't fair." Ellie gestured toward the bedroom." Just look at that. That's exactly the kind of bed frame Milt and I have been looking all over New York for."

"I'll bet it's real brass, too," said Doris." Hey, Frannie," she called over her shoulder, "do you think that bed frame's real brass?"

Frances emerged from the bathroom, Irene Crystal in tow." I'm afraid so," she said." God, I'm absolutely green with envy. And that quilt, did you ever see such a thing? It must have taken years! Don't you just love it?"

"Oh, I do," said Doris." It's beautiful." She ran her hand down one of the gleaming bedposts.

"It's criminal, that's what I think," said Ellie." Here I spend my whole life dreaming of a house in the country with a greenhouse and a pantry and a kitchen big enough to walk around in-"

" And a real library," said Doris.

"That's right, a real library, the kind they have in those Joan Aine movies, remember? With comfortable chairs and little tables next to them so you can sit and sip your sherry while you read… And who gets all this? The Kurtzes. I tell you, it's simply criminal. I mean, has anyone ever seen either of them so much as open a book?"

"Oh, George is a reader," said Frances." I can tell."

"How?"

She grinned impishly."There's a pile of Sports Illustrateds in the bathroom!"

"And how about that nursery?" said Doris. She enjoyed baiting Ellie.

"Yes, can you imagine? A separate nursery, and they don't even have children. It makes me so angry I could positively scream!"

"Oh, come on, El," said Frances, "don't get all worked up. Your two kids aren't exactly toddlers anymore. Your oldest is already out of college, for God's sake!"

"Still, all I can think of is how nice this place would have been when Milt and I were just starting out. Damn it all, going home to Long Island's going to be such a letdown."

"You're not kidding," said Irene." And the ride back's not going to be much fun either. Jack s been grumbling about it all night. We figure if we leave here at eleven-I mean, we've got to stay at least that late-we won't be home till past one."

"Well, my husband had a brilliant idea," said Frances. She seated herself on the bed." He took one look at that guest room down the hall, the one with

all those antique toys in it, and decided he wanted to spend the night here. He says if we hang around long enough, they'll have to ask us to stay the night."

"Hey, you little schemers in there!" They all looked up in guilty surprise, but it was only Mike Carlinsky standing tall and fat in the doorway, his fiancée on his arm." I heard all that. You can hatch all the plots you want to about staying the night, but I warn you, Gail and I have dibs on this room." He strode inside, the wide plank floorboards creaking beneath his weight.

"Sorry, Mike, I'm afraid you're out of luck," said Frances." This one's the master bedroom. See? Two dressers, two mirrors, and matching night tables."

Carlinsky grinned." But just one bed, huh?" Its springs groaned as he seated himself heavily upon it." Room enough for two, I'll admit, but still… didn't think old George had it in him anymore."

Fred Weingast poked his head into the room; other voices came from the hall behind him." Michael, I do declare, you're getting as catty as the girls." He leaned against the doorway, still holding his half-filled cocktail glass." I don't know about you people, but I'm not so sure I'd want to spend the night way out here. I'm a city boy, you know. Places like this make me nervous."

"Aw, what's the matter?" said Carlinsky." Can't fall asleep without the sound of traffic?"

"He'll miss the roaches," said Ellie.

"Come on over and sit down with us." Carlinsky patted the bed beside him; there was just enough room for one more person.

Weingast looked doubtful." Well, I don't think old George would be too happy if his bed collapsed… Think I'll go take a look at the attic, if I can make it up those stairs. I hear it's really something.

Anyway, kids, you'd all better mind your manners. Our esteemed hostess is on her way upstairs-" He glanced back over his shoulder, "accompanied, I

do believe, by her royal entourage."

Indeed, the babble of voices grew louder; Phyllis was conducting her promised tour of the house.

Initially the company had trooped after her like a column of dutiful schoolchildren, gaping at the various rooms that formed the first floor: the parlor and the pantry, the library with its walls of closely packed bookshelves broken only by a set of windows, the kitchen with its original oaken beams and the cast-iron meat hooks still hanging from them, the dining area and the storerooms and the fragrant little potting shed that led into the greenhouse…

But thirty adults, inebriated at that, had proved a difficult group to keep together; they'd spilled over into the balls, getting sidetracked over old maps, lagging behind and returning to the living room to refill their glasses. At last she'd simply given up, and had encouraged them to wander wherever they pleased.

"Just make sure Walter doesn't trip down the stairs," she'd said, winking at him." He looks drunk enough to break his neck! And oh, by the way, I know most of it's junk, but please try not to break anything at this early date. Wait till we've lived here a bit longer!

Otherwise, you can have the run of the house and, I guess, the run of the grounds-if anyone feels like stepping outside in this weather."

She glanced doubtfully toward the window.

" What's the matter?" said Herb, "don't the bathrooms work?"

Phyllis laughed." I just mean that if you're going to get sick, I'd rather you do it outside, all over the dead leaves, than on my nice new carpet! "

Most of the women had immediately gone back to the kitchen to exclaim once again over the maple breakfast table and the old wrought-iron gas range with the extra-deep compartment for baking bread. Others had gone

ahead to the second floor, and a few of the men had made straight for the narrow stairway to the attic, vowing to "work from the top down."

Phyllis was now advancing along the upstairs hall, accompanied by the more faithful of her audience, including Cissy Hawkins, who followed her like a child afraid of getting lost.

"Wow," Cissy was saying, "the steps in these old houses are so steep!"

She lingered near the top of the stairs, catching her breath.

"How do you do it, Phyl?"

"Remember, I've been living here for six weeks now." She smiled down at the others still on the stairs; Janet Mulholland stood on the landing, panting softly and clutching the banister for support." Honestly, girls, it does wonders for the figure."

Janet glared at her with a touch of malevolence, then started up.

"I had no idea how out of shape I was," she muttered." I haven't been this winded since the elevator strike!"

But Phyllis was already walking down the hall to her bedroom, pointing out the wall hangings to Cissy and the others." This one had to be repaired," she was saying." See? " the border. We had a little shop in New Haven do the reweaving. They're very cheap."

"Gosh, what is it?" asked Cissy." I guess this green part is meant to be leaves, but what's that group in the center? Faces?"

"Animal faces, yes. But they're so faded I'm afraid you can hardly see them. The man in the shop said it was a Middle Eastern design."

Phyllis turned and addressed the group in the hall." You know, there are two kinds of tapestries: grotesque and arabesque. Arabesque just has leaves and flowers, but this one's a grotesque-there are animals mixed in."

Ellie stood in the doorway of the bedroom, then turned back to Frances ." Honestly, did you ever?" she whispered." Listen to her, parading around her new knowledge to impress the masses."

"It's like the book, then, isn't it?" Cissy was saying." Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque."

"Oh, really?" asked Phyllis." What book?" She turned to the next tapestry; it had been hanging crookedly, and she adjusted it." This one's in much better condition. See? It's a deer and a bear, I think.

George is going to have it appraised."

Frances emerged from the bedroom." Where is he, by the way?" she asked.

" Oh, probably downstairs."

"I saw him go in the bathroom at the end of the hall," said Weingast. He shambled toward the attic stairs, his drink sloshing in his glass." The old boy looked a bit under the weather. Too much of this stuff." He held up his drink." Anybody care to join me?"

"In the attic?" asked Carlinsky, getting up from the bed with a groan (and a little support from his fiancé)." Some of the guys are already up there prowling around, I think." He followed Weingast up the stairs, pulling his woman behind him.

"Gosh, Phyl, you mean you have two bathrooms up here?" asked Cissy.

Phyllis nodded modestly." And two downstairs."

From behind them came a gasp." Oh, this stuffs lovely!" Janet had made it up the stairs, and now stood examining the tiny figurines on a shelf by the guest room." The expressions on these little things' faces are so precious! Bone china, aren't they?"

"I think so. Have you seen the ones inside the doorway?"

They followed her into the guest room, one wall of which was lined with ornamental shelves.

"Hey, this is some collection!"

Phyllis merely smiled.

"Good grief!" laughed Ellie." What do you call this stuff-knickknacks, gewgaws, thingamajigs, or urn, let's see, how about whatnots?"

" Plain old bric-a-brac's good enough for me!"

"Gee, I haven't seen one of these in years." Ellie picked up a small glass globe with a winter scene inside: when she shook it, snow swirled in a miniature blizzard. The globe beside it held a shiny black beetle, and the one next to that a tiny bouquet of dried flowers, chrysanthemums, black-eyed Susans, cornflowers, even a tiny thistle, all the colors of autumn.

Walter and Joyce Applebaum strolled in, arm in arm. While she joined the others by the shelves, he leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes, as if shutting out the room full of women. He was obviously quite drunk.

"This stuff must be worth a fortune," said Janet, examining the small figure of an elf carved in dark wood." You just don't see things like this every day. And I'll bet the ones on the bottom"-she indicated a shelf of antique cast-iron banks, dogs, and elephants, a hunter and a bear, a clown and hoop-"would cost a couple of hundred dollars, at least in New York."

Phyllis shrugged." Some of it's pretty valuable, all right, but a lot of it's just junk. George hasn't gotten around to throwing it out." She pushed aside two small stone sculptures-totemic heads of California basalt-and picked up a gray ceramic candle holder in the shape of a gargoyle, the black taper seeming to sprout from between the creature's wings." This, for example. It looks old, doesn't it?"

"Medieval."

"Yes, but feel." She handed the thing to Janet." See? Light as a feather. It's just some cheap plaster-of-Paris souvenir from... Paris, appropriately enough. We saw a lot of them when we were over there last year. They sell them at Notre Dame for seven or eight francs."

Cissy looked disappointed "Well, maybe it's not all exactly priceless," she said, "but you certainly have enough to open your own antique shop."

"Three antique shops!" said Frances.

Phyllis laughed." This is nothing. Wait'll you see the attic!"

"What, more? Where'd you acquire all this stuff.?"

"Don't forget, it wasn't us who acquired it. It was the man George bought this place from. That lunatic."

"Well, he may have been a lunatic, but he certainly had good taste," remarked Joyce, studying a group of prints on the wall by the window-a series of storybook illustrations by Dore, Rackham, and others; a Kirk pen-and-ink sketch showed what looked like the Notre Dame gargoyle, only the wings had been replaced by ropelike tentacles." Eclectic, at least," she said." What was he like?"

"I have no idea," said Phyllis." I never met the man, thank God. George never wanted me to. I'm told he was highly unpleasant."

"What was the matter?" asked Frances. She was sliding open the drawer of a small end table; inside, the drawer was freshly dusted, and empty. "He keep raving about little green men?"

"He may have. He may very well have. All I know is, he had very unclean habits. This place stank like a sewer when I first saw it. And it wasn't fixed up like this, believe me. It was a mess."

"What, the whole house?"

"You could barely push your way through, for the junk."

" No, I mean the smell. All over?"

Phyllis paused to draw the curtains, holding back the night." Every room. That's why we took so long to move in. First we tried to air the place out, but that didn't work, so then we had to have men in to fumigate. And believe me, those people charge an arm and a leg.

George nearly had a fit."

"All I know is, it smells okay now," said Cissy a little too quickly.

"Really, Phyl, you've done a marvelous job cleaning."

"Well, I don't really deserve the credit. There are people you can hire for jobs like that. Those fireplaces were the hardest, I'm told.

Filled with dirt and ashes. I'm glad we won't have to depend on them when winter comes. Imagine, one in every room!"

"Even in the kitchen," sighed Joyce." Oh, Waltie, if we could only have one built in our kitchen-even a fake one… Wouldn't that be nice?"

Her husband opened his eyes. They were bloodshot." Yeah," he said, "we'd be the rage of Scarsdale." He looked away.

"Why don't you just settle for the hooks?" asked Frances.

"You mean those meat hooks on the ceiling?"

"Sure, they wouldn't cost much. And Walter could hang salami on them!"

"But we have no beams to put them in."

Phyllis intervened." Obviously, then, the thing to do is to let George find you a house like this, beams and all."

"That's what I keep tellin' everybody," whined Walter.

She ignored him." Come on, let me show you our bedroom.

There's some more junk in there."

They followed her down the hall, and all the women who hadn't already seen the brass bed frame made the appropriate, and predictable, gasps of delight.

"Oh, where'd you get it?" Janet wanted to know." You don't mean to tell me this came with the house, too."

Phyllis beamed." Where else?"

"Boy, the previous owner must have lived a pretty good life here.

What happened, his wife die and he go to pieces?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Phyllis." I doubt he was even married."

Janet's eyes widened." You mean he lived here all alone? In this huge house?"

Phyllis shrugged." I told you he was crazy. He may have had a dog or something to keep him company, I'm not sure. I think George said something about a pet."

The bedsprings groaned as Walter fell heavily onto the mattress.

He lay back full length, careful nonetheless to keep his shoes off the patchwork quilt." Well, I'd say he was one guy who knew how to live."

Giving an extended yawn, he stretched as if ready for bed." I mean, this is a comfortable place. A li'l drafty, but comfortable. An' this is a comfortable bed." He closed his eyes and appeared to doze.

Joyce looked an apology. at her hostess." He always gets like this when he's had a hard week. Anyone want to help me drag him out?"

"No-no-no, leave him be. Let him take a little nap. Like he said, it's a comfortable bed." Phyllis prided herself on her tact." The weird thing is, the man we bought the house from didn't even use it. He slept on a cot."

"You're kidding!"

"Nothing but a cot?"

"That's all. I tell you, the way some bachelors live Phyllis shook her head." George found this brass frame in the attic, underneath a pile of junk. We polished it up and bought a new -or it. But it's still not in such good condition. See?" She pointed toward the metal legs; they looked as if they'd been gnawed." I'm afraid it got a bit battered up there."

From the hall came the sound of heavy feet on wood, and of loud voices.

Herb peered into the doorway, blinking at the light." Excuse me, ladies. Is my wife in here?"

"Tommie's downstairs."

"Hey, Walt! Walt!" Harold Lazarus burst into the room, pushing the others out of the doorway." Wake up, boy, you've got to come up and see the attic." He began tugging at Walter's ankles.

"Honey, come on, leave him alone. He's taking a little nap." Frances put her arm around Harold's waist." Let's go back downstairs. I want another seven-and-seven."

"Is it really nice up there?" asked Cissy.

"It's great!" said Harold, disengaging himself from his wife's arm.

"There's stacks of magazines, some crazy old almanacs and star charts, old knives, a barber chair, kids' toys… A lot of the stuffs rusted, but you ought to see the magazines. Almost a hundred years old, some of them."

Phyllis frowned." I nearly forgot about those things. When we cleaned this place out, we put off doing the attic. We just stuck all the junk up there, all the stuff we couldn't use. Someday we'll have to go over the whole place-just as soon as it gets warm. As it is, it's a firetrap, all that paper."

"Hey, don't throw those magazines away," said Harold." They might be worth something. A few bucks, at least."

Phyllis shook her head." It's a real rats' nest up there. Like something out of the Collier brothers."

"That's for sure!" said Harold.

Fred Weingast entered the room, his glass now empty." Hey, that's a wild place you've got, Phyl. A lot of old toys, stuff in jars, some old uniforms-Christ, I didn't think I'd ever see one of those Army jackets again, the kind with the snaps on the pockets… There's even an old department store mannequin, way in the corner, pretty chewed up now but scary as hell." He laughed." I mean, the thing was naked! Herb thought we'd found a body!"

"Come on, Frannie, let's go up." Harold tugged at his wife's arm.

"I want to show you some of those old magazines. They've got ads for women's clothes, and some of em are really a scream."

"Aw, honey, I'm too tired, and those steps look so steep…"

"Couldn't you just bring a few down?" She turned to Phyllis for help.

"It's really not worth going up," agreed Phyllis." It isn't insulated up there, and the place really gets freezing this time of year. Especially at night."

"She's right, you know," said Weingast, shifting his empty glass from hand to hand." You could see your breath, even. Think I'll head back down for a refill-something that'll really warm me up." He turned to look down the hall." Anyway, I think my wife's down there."

Harold looked disappointed as the rest filed out behind Weingast.

He glanced at his friend; Walter lay sprawled on the bed, snoring softly like some large hibernating animal. Harold gave him a few ineffectual nudges, then said, "Ah, hell," and followed the others downstairs.

George sat in the bathroom, crouching like some small hunted animal. He was acutely conscious of the muffled voices that penetrated the bathroom door, punctuated now and again by more boisterous ones when a couple strode past in the hall outside. He leaned forward, waiting for the cramps to subside. If he held his breath and strained to hear, he could pick out a few words."… may take the option on it, but they don't That would be Faschman and, most likely, Sid Gerdts.

Silence for a while. Footsteps in the attic overhead. Then whispered voices, women's." No, wait, don't go in."

"I just-"

"No, I think someone's in there."

The voices moved on.

George sighed and stared down at the tiles on the floor, wishing he had something to read. Against Phyllis's wishes he always left a few magazines in the bathroom near the stairs, but that had been occupied; and this one, right off the guest room, was still relatively bare, save for the black plastic shelves and soap dish, all glossy and sharpedged, that his wife had put up this morning. Already the slab of soap lay melting like ice in a little puddle of greasy water. And little black guest towels, they were her idea, too, with stiff lace trim, to be left sopping on the floor or stuck awkwardly back on the rack. The house was not yet livable.

Yet any bareness was preferable to the squalor in which he'd found it.

Of course, it was what he should have expected, after seeing the flecks of dried skin on the man's lips and the stain on those trousers. A recluse, they'd called him, using the polite word. Eyes like a sorcerer, they said. Perhaps the locals had thought him colorful. But George still recalled the socks on the dresser, the deposits under the sink, and the stench of rotting meat.

And the threats…

He felt his intestines churn, and winced; when would it stop? The tiles seemed to make some sort of pattern, but the pain made him impatient.

Red rectangle at the upper left of each square, no, every other square, and in the next row the design was reversed, so that…

Yet over near the door the pattern changed. Automatically he cursed the ancient, unknown builders of this house, then realized he himself had had the room retiled before moving in.

They'd kept all the original fixtures, though. It added to the atmosphere. The bathtub even had legs, like in the old pictures, reminding him of animal claws, thick and stubby. One, two, three…

He lost count and started over. Yes, there were five fingers on each claw. They didn't make bathtubs like that anymore. Big enough for a whole family, too-not that the original owner had ever needed one that size.

He'd smelled as if he hadn't bathed in years.

A woman's laughter echoed in the hall, and then the low, eager voice of a man, perhaps recounting a joke. Damn it, he'd miss the whole party this way! Searching for something to pass the time, he tugged out his wallet and began leafing through it. I.D. cards told him he was George W. Kurtz, credit cards listed restrictions in tiny blue print…

What a bore. He began counting his money.

"George?" Phyllis knocked on the door." Are you in there?"

"Yeah," he grunted." I'll be right out."

"Are you all right, honey?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. I'll be right out."

"Is there anything I can get you?"

"I said I was okay."

She seemed to go away for a moment, then returned; her voice came from just outside the door." We're all going back downstairs.

Walt's asleep on the bed, though. Don't wake him."

"Mmm."

"Did you say something, honey?" Holding his own breath, he could hear her breathing on the other side. She paused as if to say something else, then went away.

In the silence he wondered what was wrong with him. Something he'd eaten, perhaps. Those shrimp last night? But no, that had been two nights ago, and he'd barely had a thing all day. Maybe he could no longer hold his liquor.

Still, the ache felt like fear. He wondered what he was afraid of That was how it always worked: he'd feel the tension in the pit of his stomach, and only then would he attempt to choose the thoughts that had produced it. First the effect, then the cause-as if his mind held so many unexplored levels, mystery upon mystery, that he never knew the things it contained until his stomach told him.

Nerves, obviously, over the success of this party. The bane of all hosts, particularly at a big affair like this. Still, he hadn't realized he'd been so worried…

An unsatisfying explanation-but abruptly the pain left him. He made himself ready and stepped into the hall, checking on Walter as he passed the bedroom; the face on the quilt looked red and puffy, like an infant's who'd gone to bed squawling. George fastened the door to the attic, sealing out the cold, and headed downstairs.

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"I suppose pencil and paper are out of the question.

"Yeah, sure, I mean what do you expect? Give him a free hand and I he'll go for them bandages. Give him a pencil and he'll poke his own eyes f out. I don't put nothing past these people, not after what I seen."

The doctor sighed. "It's rather frustrating, you must admit. A perfect suicidal depressive, ripe for therapy, and he's incapable of speech. "

He stared at the man on the bed; the man on the bed stared back "Perhaps when his throat heals, if we keep him in restraint.

"Sometimes he'll talk to me.

"Pardon? You say he speaks-"

"Well, no, not exactly. What I mean is, he taps his foot against the wall, see? Like when he wants me to turn him over.

The other shook his head "I'm afraid that hardly constitutes real communication. A yes-or-no response, perhaps, but quite useless for our needs. No, I think we'll simply have to wait a month or two, and "Oh, he don't just say yes or no. He taps out whole words. See, we got this code. " He drew from his pocket a frayed scrap of paper. "A is one, B is two; it goes like that. then… "There's an instruction booklet inside. Only trouble is, it's in 'And to say a word like 'zoo' would take all night. No, thanks. The doctor looked at his watch." For the time being, some medication-"

"No, you don't understand You see, Z is two taps, and then six.

Twenty-six, get it? And O would he 'll- he studied the paper- "one, and then five. Pretty smart, huh?"

"It would still take all night, and I have thirty other patients to worry about." He looked again at his watch. 'And rounds to make before bedtime. No, I think we'll keep him on the Thorazine, and I'll prescribe twenty-five milligrams of Tofranil. We can try that for a while He walked down the hall, scribbling in his notebook The orderly remained in the doorway of the room, staring at the man on the bed. The man on the bed stared back

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In the living room Herb Rosenzweig was trying to organize a game. Faces turned as George entered.

"We missed you, George. Thought you'd fallen in!"

He grinned sheepishly and moved toward the bar, both flattered and annoyed that his absence had been noted. Couldn't these people fend for themselves? It wasn't as if they were all strangers to one another.

"Herb here thought you'd been eaten by a bear!"

"That's what I told'em, George."

George shrugged. "No such luck. I think it was what I ate!"

Amid their laughter Phyllis called, "Now, don't put ideas in their heads, or nobody'll finish the quiche. I spent all day making it." She pointed to the plates of hors d'oeuvres by the bar."And you people aren't eating the sausages," she chided. "They'll just lie there in the refrigerator if no one eats them."

A few guests, cowed, shuffled toward the food. Cissy called to him from across the room. "We're going to tell our fortunes, George. You're just in time. Herb has a pack of cards."

"A Tarot deck," said Herb, pronouncing the final t. "I found it up in your attic, in one of the trunks." He held forth a green cardboard box decorated with line drawings and the words Grand Etteilla. Cellophane still clung to the sides." I wanted to see what they looked like," he explained." Hope you don't mind. I don't think the pack had ever been opened before."

"Do you know how to use them?"

"French."

"I'm a little rusty myself," George was saying, but Milton interrupted him.

"Ellie's a whiz at French. Christ, you should've seen her over there, last summer. They thought she was a native. "He snatched the booklet from Herb's hand and gave it to his wife. "Go ahead, what's it say?"

"Oh, this is easy," she said." 'Manidre de Tirer le Grand Etteilla ou Tarots Egyptiens, Composd de Soixante-dix-huit Cartes Illustrdes." Well, you can pick that up, can't you?"

"Something about Egyptian cards," said Frances.

"Does it say how to lay them out?" asked Herb.

Ellie flipped through the pages. "Hmm, there aren't any diagrams. Pretty cheap. There's something in the front, though. 'To use the cards, it is necessary first to strike the game by the person who.."

She paused in her reading. "Oh, I see. The person whose fortune's being told has to hit the cards with his left hand."

"Whose fortune's being told?" asked George, without much interest.

Anything, though, to amuse the guests…

Herb shrugged." We can try Tommie's, if she wants. Does it say how to spread them?"

"I wish I could remember how Joan Blondell did them in Nightmare Alley," said Ellie." All I remember is, she kept turning up the death card for Tyrone Power."

"The Hanged Man," said Cissy, with a nervous little laugh.

"Mmm, that's right. Well, let's see." Ellie squinted at the booklet.

"Oh boy, this is so complicated… I don't know if it's worth it. It'll take half an hour to set up."

"Aw, forget it then," said Herb, already casting about for new games to play.

Tammie put her arm around him." From now on we'll stick to fortune cookies."

George watched the group begin falling away around him, dissolving into small clots of conversation, but Phyllis picked up her cue.

"Why don't we do it the fast way? We'll all pick a card, and that'll be our fortune. Here, give me, I'll shuffle."

For tradition's sake she rapped once on the box, and the cards were duly passed among the guests until each held one." I feel as though we're about to play bingo!" said Fred Weingast, puzzling over his card." What is this, anyway? It's The Three of something, I can tell, but what are they? Dinner plates?"

Harold peered over his shoulder." That's it-The Three of Dinner Plates!"

"They look like coins to me," said Weingast's wife.

Ellie was leafing through the booklet." No," she said, "they're pentacles. See? A five-pointed star inside each circle."

" What's it supposed to mean?"

"Let's see. Okay, here we go." She looked up at Weingast and smiled mysteriously, then turned to the text." 'A person noble and distinguished-' "

"Hey, that's me to a T!" shouted Weingast.

Ellie waited for the laughter to subside, then continued." Sorry, people, but you've got it wrong. Listen. 'A person noble and distinguished has need of silver-uh, money-and you should lend it to him." "

Immediately, and predictably, Harold scurried over and slapped him on the back." Fred, old pal, how about it?"

There were several paragraphs of text still to read, but the gag had run its course. Ellie turned to the rest." Okay, kids, who's next?"

Ignoring the drunken cries of "Me-me-me-me," she reached for Frances' card. In smeary lithograph it depicted a small blond boy holding a gold chalice; the background was pastoral, with dark green hills and a waterfall." Oh, a picture card," she said." Maybe that means it's important." She squinted down at the text." Apparently he's The Page of Cups. Sort of like The Jack of Diamonds, I guess. 'Have confidence absolute,' it says-absolute confidence-'in the young man blond that you offers… that offers you his service." Gee, Frannie, who do you know who's blond?"

Harold answered for her." Damn it, I'll bet it's that delivery boy!"

He made a big show of being the cuckolded husband, which all but Frances found amusing.

"Do Phyllis next," suggested someone.

" Yeah, come on, do Phyllis." The others took up the chant.

Phyllis squirmed like a little girl asked to make a birthday speech.

"No," she said, smiling nervously, "really, I don't want to hear mine. I always believe in fortunes, and they're always bad." She hid the card behind her back." Do George's first."

Ellie shrugged." Okay, then, let me see it." She held out her hand.

" But I haven't got a card," said George.

"Too busy playing the proper host," said Milton. He picked up the pile of cards." Come on, there's more than half the pack left. Take one."

" Close your eyes first," added Herb.

George sighed." Okay, okay. But I'm telling you, the guests are supposed to come first." He took the cards from Milton and shuffled through them, eyes shut. He lifted one from the middle of the deck 100 and looked down at it." Good God!" He slipped it back in the deck and continued to shuffle.

"Hey," cried Ellie." I saw that. No fair. You cheated!"

"He's entitled," said Bernie." I mean, it's his house, right?"

The other guests had lost interest in all fortunes but their own; some had wandered over to the bar. Ellie, however, wasn't mollified.

"I'll bet he had The Hanged Man. Isn't that right, George? Just like in the movie?"

"Just like in the movie," said George, his eyes shut." Here, give me a reading on this one." He drew forth a card and handed it to her.

"The Eight of Wands," she said." 'Learning a trade or a profession.

Employment or commission to come. Skill in affairs-in material affairs." I'm afraid that's a pretty general one."

"Well, it's not so far off," said Milton." George is skilled in material affairs."

Herb shrugged." Yeah, but so are we all. I mean, this kind of stuff could apply to anyone here. It's really no better than that column in the News. You know, The Stargazer's Prophecy, or something like that.

My secretary lives by it."

George had moved away from them. He stood by one of the windows, staring out at the night, trying to disguise the pain in his stomach.

Because of the light inside it was impossible to see well, but he could hear the tapping of dead leaves against the glass. He heard, too, a few of the women squealing over Phyllis's card, The Lovers, and he thought of the one he had drawn forth, and had returned to the deck so hurriedly after the briefest glimpse-an amorphous mass of gray, like the back of some huge animal, illuminated as if by moonlight. It had seemed disturbingly familiar. Amid the babble of voices its memory was already beginning to fade, but not the uneasiness it had aroused, the vague, half-buried guilt… With a start he noticed his own reflection in the window, and saw the savage twist of his mouth. He smoothed back his hair, smiled, and turned back to the company.

Entropy had set in. All but a few had tired of the game and had once again broken into smaller groups, those most bored drifting toward the bar like sediment to the bottom of a pond. Sidney Gerdts was holding forth to the Goodhues and the Fitzgeralds-the fall of the dollar, or perhaps the rise of crime-and Phyllis was trying to get Paul Strauss to talk to poor Cissy Hawkins. Fred Weingast was making himself another drink. Over by the corner Herb and Milton sat on the couch comparing the achievements of their children. Others had wandered off to the kitchen and library. For the time being they all seemed occupied; he passed among them unnoticed, on his way back to the bathroom.

"I've never seen him like this," Herb was saying." He's been so evasive. Usually he'll brag about a smart deal till you're sick of listening, but this time he played modest with me. I could tell something was funny the minute I came in."

"You mean that bit about 'just lucky, I guess'? Jesus, wasn't that something!" Milton shook his head.

"Yeah, all he'd say was the guy went a little ga-ga and sold him this place for a song."

"Is that what he told you?"

"That was it. But, well, you seem to know a bit more about what really went on."

Milton stared down into his glass, watching the ice cubes shrink and change shape." Well, I don't know all that much."

"Aw, come on. I hear you've been riding him about it all night."

"Maybe I've sobered up a little since then."

"Aw, hell, you know I'll keep this to myself."

He studied Herb's face, and saw the endless cocktails of expense account lunches, the daily betrayals disguised as good fellowship.

Herb would make a good story out of this.

"How about it?"

"Well Milton watched George sidle through the room and head upstairs."

Okay, why not?"

In the room upstairs Walter slept fitfully. A floorboard groaned outside the door-George on his way up the hall-and was echoed by the huge limb of an elm beyond the window. Walter turned heavily onto his side, buried his face in the pillow, and slept on, one hand twisting a wrinkle of quilt as if clenched upon a steering wheel.

The women on the couch had begun talking about food costs, and Tammie was bored. It took parties like this to remind her that she preferred the company of men." I'm sure they are better for you," Janet Mulholland was saying, "but the prices they charge in those health food stores are outrageous." Tammie looked around for her husband; he was in the corner by the window, talking with Milt Brackman. Pretty soon they'd be swapping dirty jokes.

A bridge table had been set up near the bar, piled high with paper plates and plastic forks. Big Mike Carlinsky was bent over it, showing something to his fiancée-what was her name? Gail.

"You want your fortune done?" He smiled up as Tammie strolled over; Gail looked at her coldly." According to this, I'm gonna have five kids, but Gail's only gonna have two!" Laughing, he pointed to an open page in the booklet, but Tammie couldn't read a word of French.

"You still got your card?"

The green box lay next to an empty hor d'oeuvres platter, Tarot cards piled haphazardly beside it where guests had left them. The top card showed a stone tower crumbling as a bolt of lightning hit it. In the background the sea raged furiously.

"No, I put mine back in the box. There were just too many people ahead of me. But let's see, I think I can find it again." She began sorting through the deck, aware that Mike's eyes were on her; he was probably trying to decide if she was wearing a bra." Hey, look at this," she said, producing the picture of a regal woman." I like this one better than my own card! What's it mean?"

"The Queen of Swords," said Gail." You're not allowed to choose, you know. You can't just pick the prettiest card and say you want it." She looked guardedly at her fiance.

He was already flipping through the booklet." Queen of Swords, huh?

Sounds dangerous." He stopped and read to himself, lips moving."

Something about old age, I think." Tammie stiffened.

"Isn't 'vielle' the word for old?" He saw she wasn't grinning, and his own grin faded." But apparently it means one thing if you hold it one way and something else if it's upside down."

" It was right side up, wasn't it?" said Gail.

"The other way," he went on, "it means the woman tyrannizes her husband.

Hhmm! Poor old Herb! And I always thought he wore the pants."

Tammie forced a laugh." Oh, I let him think so, that's all!" She looked over at her husband, still deep in conversation with Milton.

"Now I want to find the card I really picked."

She scanned the pack. Most of the cards were bare but for groups of symbols-seven cups, four pentagrams, a series of sticklike objects-reminding her of the canasta deck at home. But some of them bore full-color illustrations, archetypes even she could respond to.

"This is nice. A chariot, I guess. Ugh! Here's Death." The skeleton leaned casually on his scythe." I thought The Hanged Man was supposed to be the

death card."

"I guess not," said Gail." See? Here it is." She turned the card upside down, so that the figure stared at them." And, see, he's smiling."

"What's this one?" asked Mike." Looks like a phallic symbol, doesn't it!" He glanced at Tammie. The card showed an enormous hand emerging godlike from the clouds, clasping an upright stick.

"That's the Ace of Wands," said Gail. And, in explanation: "I've got a paperback at home. I haven't bought the cards yet, though. I've seen much prettier decks than this. Remember, Mike? Down in the Village?

But it seemed like a waste of money."

"Mmm." He turned over some cards that had been left face down.

"Maybe I'll buy you a pack. For slow parties." He laughed guiltily.

"What do you think this one's supposed to be?"

She took it from him and stared at it. It was a night scene, with a few stars low in the background. At the center was a gray liver-shaped thing; animal, apparently, though the head was turned away." Gee, I don't think I've ever seen this kind before." She handed it back to him, not looking at it." Of course, every set is different. I like the modern ones best. Like the deck we saw that time in the Village."

Tammie studied the card for a moment, then gave a tentative smile."

Reminds me of veal cutlet!" A moment later she joined Mike's laughter, laying the card face down on the table." Do you think there are any of those cute little sausages left?"

"Well, the platter's gone, but I can look in the fridge." He put his hand on Gail's shoulder." Be back in a second, honey."

The foot tapped against the wall, paused, then tapped eight times in succession. Seated at the foot of the bed, the orderly looked down at the

paper." Eighteen, that's… P- " The foot tapped twice, then once. U Once, then four times.

"I got the story from Bart Cipriano," Milton was saying." He works in Commissioner Brodsky's office at the capitol, and he's buddy-buddy with George. So's Brodsky. At first I was surprised they weren't here tonight, but then I realized they'd already been to this house-and often, I'll bet. Besides, George may be just a little ashamed of them."

"Why? Who is this Brodsky?"

"He's with the State Highway Commission."

"Oh yeah, I remember hearing that George had a bit of clout in that department. Not bad for a guy with an office in New York."

"But don't forget, he's lived here in Connecticut all his life. And until a few months ago he was living right down the block from Brodsky.

Big poker players, both of them." He looked for signs of interest in the other's face. Herb's gaze never wavered." Anyway, according to Cipriano, the state had been planning a big highway up here to replace 81-"

"It's about time! The roads are so dark I damned near had an accident getting here." ,,-and it was supposed to cut right through this property." He made a slicing motion." Yep, that's right-all this land, this house, even, was right in the path of the highway. So some people were going to have to get out of the way. Not that many, of course. It's pretty underpopulated around here. Tobacco country, mainly, and a few small farms. I guess that's why they picked this place to run the road through."

"Jesus, you mean they're gonna demolish this place?"

Milton shook his head." Not so fast. Just after the notices were sent out-you know, 'Dear Sir, You've got six months to find another house,' or something like that-the crooks in the governor's office cut back funds and the whole

plan was canceled. No road after all. But thanks to the usual red tape-you know how these state governments are-they decided the cutback wouldn't be official till the end of the fiscal year. Which means that, all this time, Brodsky had a letter sitting on his desk junking the project, except that he wasn't supposed to tell anyone." He paused for effect." Well, guess who he told."

" George?"

"Your friend and mine. I guess he knew that George was looking for a bigger place and, who knows?, maybe he owed him a favor. Let's not be naive-this sort of thing goes on all the time. And maybe George had something on him, I don't know. Anyway, he gave George the go-ahead. He said, in effect, Pick yourself whatever house you like from Beth Head on up to Tylersville, and we'll get it for you." He took a sip of his drink ." I expect a little money may have changed hands."

"I don't understand. You mean he had free choice? Any place he wanted?"

"That's right. And he wanted this." He shrugged." Who wouldn't?

Just look around. I don't think George had ever seen the inside of this place, though, till he watched the state marshal's break down the door.

You see, the guy in here wouldn't get out. A bit of a crackpot, they say."

"And once George was in, you mean-"

"Exactly. They announced the highway wouldn't go through after all. And by then it was too late."

"But how about the guy they'd kicked out? Couldn't he sue, for Chrissake? I mean, he had a pretty good case for himself, and…

Hell! He could bring'em all to court for a stunt like that."

"Nope, not where he is now. I told you he was a loony, didn't I?"

"You mean "Uh-huh. They had him put away." Milton grinned." Oh, that part was all aboveboard, nothing funny about that. From what I hear, he was a real straitjacket case. Kicked like a wild man when they took him away, biting and spitting… And calling for his son to come back and help him. 'Petey,' he kept screaming, 'Petey, Petey,' over and over. At least that's what it sounded like. I guess he thought his son would come to his rescue. Only..."

"Only what?"

"Only he didn't have a son."

"Tsk tsk tsk. Poor guy."

"Yeah, well, that's what I thought. But Cipriano says he wasn't too charming a character. He said the marshals had to literally hold their noses when they broke down the door, that's how bad it was. Like the lion house at the zoo, he said. Maybe the guy had pets and never cleaned up after them. Cost George a fortune to have the place fixed up." He stared into his drink; the ice had shrunk and lost its shape, floating on the surface like a jellyfish, evolution in reverse." Still, he made a killing on this deal. He bought the house from the state, and got it for next to nothing."

"How about the other people they moved out? They put up a stink, too?"

"That supposed to be a pun?"

Herb guffawed." Never thought of that!"

"You don't understand-they never had to move anybody else.

They just held off till George was home free, and then Brodsky announced the cutback. The notices were rescinded, and everybody was happy.

"Oh, I get it." Herb looked disappointed." So it's too late now, huh?"

"Too late for what?"

"To pick up a place like this for myself."

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"R.U.N. Run?"

The man on the bed nodded. His foot tapped once, twice, and three times; once, twice, and five times.

"Run away."

The man on the bed nodded.

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Irene Crystal put her hand on Phyllis's." Excuse me," she whispered,

"we're going now, I just wanted to say good-bye."

Phyllis left Cissy to fend for herself." Oh, what a shame!" she cried automatically." Can't you stay just a little longer? It's so early yet."

"I'd love to, dear, believe me. But Jack's folks are coming over tomorrow morning, and if I know them"-she rolled her eyes comically-"they'll be ringing the bell at nine."

Phyllis kept Irene talking while ushering her toward the coat closet, anxious lest the sight of one early departure produce a mass exodus among the others." Well, I certainly do hope you'll find the time to come out again real soon. It's not as far as it looks, really, once you know the way."

"Oh, no, honestly, it wasn't a bad trip at all." Jack was already standing by the coat closet. Phyllis looked nervously at the other guests." It's just that his folks are coming down, otherwise we'd never think of leaving so soon."

Jack leaned toward her." I wanted to thank George," he said solemnly, a small boy remembering his manners, "but he was in the bathroom. You will thank him for me, won't you?"

"God, is he in there again?" Phyllis grimaced." Yes, of course I will."

"Tell him we think it's just the most fantastic place we've ever seen.

The find of a lifetime."

A few of the people at the bar had noticed them. Fred Weingast glanced at his watch." Yes, of course I will." Phyllis wished the two would hurry up and leave quietly.

"I'm still amazed about what you said upstairs."

"Pardon me?"

"Upstairs," Irene went on." In your bedroom. About the man before you living here all alone."

Phyllis watched Weingast out of the corner of her eye." Quite a character, wasn't he?"

" But why a nursery?"

"What? Oh, the nursery! Well, we tried to keep things the way we found them. It was like that when we came. Maybe we'll turn it into another guest room." She flashed a big grin at the Crystals." That way you'll be able to come more often, without "No," Irene persisted, "I mean, it was already here when you moved in, right? But you said that man never had any children."

Damn it! Now Arthur Faschman was looking at his watch." I'm sure I don't know," she said hurriedly." I guess it was here when he moved in."

"With all those toys? A lot of them looked used."

"Maybe he played with them himself. I told you he was crazy."

"Honey, we're going to have a long drive as it is," said Jack." I don't want to get back too late." He moved into the front donning his overcoat.

Phyllis held the door open for them." Whew! These November nights are freezing out here! It's the open fields, George says-no wind resistance." She

backed away from the blast of cold air. Then, as if by rote: "Just make sure you drive carefully and get home safe."

Irene smiled." I only allowed him two drinks all night." She kissed Phyllis on the cheek." Bye-bye, dear, and thanks."

"Be sure to thank George for us," said Jack as the door was closing.

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"So you think you're gonna run away, huh?" The man on the bed shook his head "No, sir! You ain't going nowhere, buster. Last time an inmate got out, we caught up with him in less than twelve hours, and that was before we installed the new alarm system. Uh-uh, no way!"

The man on the bed shook his head, more violently this time; his mouth twisted into a snarl.

"I get it, you want me to run away?"

More violently still. Then, quickly.- eight, two, and one; one and four .

H.U.N.G.R.Y

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The voices from the living room were lost in the twistings of the corridor, and the library stood dark and deserted. The door had been left open, but Ellie lingered in the hall, reluctant to enter. Running her hand along the inside of the doorway and finding no switch, she inched toward one of the heavy floor lamps that stood beside a desk, the two forms outlined by moonlight. The rug felt thick and silent beneath her feet, like animal fur. There was something about the room that made one tiptoe, lest some presence be disturbed.

The lamp's sudden glare dazzled her, and in the instant before blindness she saw something rise from the desktop. A cry came from them both, but the other was first to speak.

"Who…? Uh-oh, what time is it?"

"Doris! God, you gave me a fright! Who were you hiding from?"

"Sorry, I must have fallen asleep. I was in the middle of this story"-she indicated the book that lay open on the desk'and I thought I'd take a little nap. It's such a long trip home, and if I know Sid he'll be in no condition to drive." She rubbed her eyes." He's been looking for me?"

"I'm sorry to say you haven't even been missed."

"Why, what time is it?"

"Not yet eleven, I think."

"Well that's a relief. Still early, then. Sorry I scared you. I probably shouldn't have turned off the light."

" What were you reading?"

She slid the book toward her." It's a translation of one in the living room. A children's book, I think. I'm amazed he'd buy two copies."

"I gather you were using it as a pillow."

Doris smiled." Yes, I- Oh my gosh, did I get print all over my cheek?"

She tilted her face in the light for the other's inspection.

"This makeup picks up more dirt and soot, especially in the city…

"You're-okay. You may have smeared that picture a bit, though."

She pointed to a small woodcut in the center of the left-hand page.

"Good Lord, what is it?"

"Isn't he cute? He's called the Little Devil." She flipped back toward the beginning of the story." See, the farmer plants this bean, and then he waters

it every day"-she indicated the illustrations"and when autumn comes, and harvest time, there he is, growing right out of the ground."

Ellie wrinkled up her nose." Precious."

George snapped off the bathroom light and walked down the hall to the small door at the end. When he opened it a rush of chill air settled around him; climbing the steep wooden stairs, he made a mental note, for the dozenth time, to see about having the attic insulated. Otherwise they'd simply have to keep the door locked all winter.

Upstairs his breath turned to mist, but the cold sobered him; it came in pleasant contrast to the stuffy air below. Anyway, he'd only stay up here for a minute or two, just long enough to see if the memories matched.

He picked his way through the piles of magazines, some neatly bound with twine, the result of their housecleaning, others strewn about the floor.

The junk had accumulated here at the top of the house like debris left after a flood. A shape in the corner caught his eye, something pink and vulnerable-the mannequin, with its ravaged head, lying pressed into the crevice where sloping roof met floorboards. Turning away toward the metal cabinets against the far wall, he felt uneasy knowing it was behind him. Someone had removed the old blanket he'd thrown over it, Herb or one of the others. He thought briefly of searching for another cloth, perhaps some dusty tarpaulin, but the cold had seeped through his thin cotton shirt and added to his growing sense of urgency. Outside a wind stirred the roof beams.

His way to the cabinets was blocked by the dilapidated wreck of a bureau and, propped against it, the shell of a medicine chest, its door sagging open, the mirror somehow intact. He avoided looking at his image as he stepped past it: an old fear, resurrected in the faint attic light, to see some other face looking back at him. Straining, he shoved the bureau aside and pulled on the door nearest him; it yielded grudgingly, metal grating on metal. Within, a rack was hung with children's clothes; others lay crumpled on the metal floor, gathering dust. All were wrinkled, as if stored here after having been

soiled, and like a gym locker, the cabinet reeked of old sweat. He let the door hang open.

The next was lined with deep shelves, empty but for a few rusted tools that had rolled backward into the darkness, and the door to the third had been torn from its hinges; bent double, it was shoved lengthwise into the cabinet, leaving one jagged end that stuck out. The door on the end swung open more easily, but stopped part way, blocked by the bureau; he tugged, jostling the cabinet slightly, but it held fast. He stepped around the bureau and peered inside.

It was as he remembered it. The jars rattled against the metal as if responding to the chill, their liquid insides sloshing rhythmically. In the front row small wrinkled things floated serenely in formaldehyde, fetuses of dog and pig and man, their bulbous eyes closed as if in reverie, with only the labels to tell them apart. He shoved his hip against the bureau; the door opened a few inches more and the slash of light grew wider.

Reaching into the darkness, he succeeded in shoving one of the ja rs to the side. Below an adhesive labeled "Pig" a huddled figure bobbed up and down. The opening was still too narrow, the jar too big to remove, but in the space behind it he could make out a second row of jars.

Pulling one to the front, into a stray beam of light that passed through a crack in the door, he wiped away the thin film of dust that obscured its contents. The tape read "PD #14" in black ballpoint.

Regretting that he'd never found out just what those letters stood for, he peeled the tape aside to get a closer look.

Yes, the memories matched. It was just like the thing on the card.

But the decomposition was worse than he'd remembered, worse than in the other specimens, as if the thing had shrunk and lost shape. Half buried in sediment, the small gray lump rested on the bottom, turning lazily in the cloudy liquid. Once, on his first time here, he'd been tempted to scrape aside the wax that sealed the top, to unscrew the lid and pour the contents down the toilet like a piece of bad meat. But tonight he understood, if only

from the faint odor that hung about the shelves, how easily the smell would sicken him. He slid it back into place, between jars labeled "PD #13" and "PD #15," where it clinked against a third row-and there was still another row behind that. The shelves were deep. There were twenty-two jars in all, he knew, and the specimens seemed to grow progressively larger with each number; he remembered one jar on the bottom, hidden way in. the back, nearly filled with something whose rotting flesh hung off it in ribbons. It had been too unpleasant to look at closely.

He closed the cabinet and picked his way back to the stairs, stumbling once on the tiny arm or leg of some long-discarded doll. Descending the stairs, he wondered how much it would cost to have the whole place cleaned out. In some ways this house had proved more expensive than he'd bargained for.

The iron railing felt thin and cold in his grip, and gave slightly when he leaned on it; a strong man might easily have yanked it free.

The repairs an old house required… he wished he were handier at such tasks. Once, long ago, he'd had the necessary skills, and had enjoyed working with his hands. He'd been a schoolboy then; the world had contained fewer secrets. Biology had been his special love; he had even dreamed, once, of medical school. How much he'd forgotten since then, and how mystifying the world had become.

Perhaps he could find a doctor in the area, some country G.P. he could trust. He'd have a lot of questions for him: about things that floated silently in jars, and what they fed upon. And how big they could grow.

"Oh, El, you're just an old fogey. Don't you like fairy tales?"

Doris pointed to the woodcut." See? The farmer dresses him up in a little suit, and tucks him in at night, and he has himself a little friend."

" I don't think I'd want that thing for a friend."

"Well, that's the whole point. That's why he's called the Little Devil.

He's supposed to help the farmer tend the garden and clean the house, but he just causes mischief and eats up whatever's lying around.

Including a few of the neighbors."

Ellie shrugged." I'm afraid I don't approve of fairy tales, at least not for very young children. They're really quite frightening, and so many of them are unnecessarily violent, don't you think? Our two grew up quite nicely without them, thank God." She paused, then added, "Not that a steady diet of the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew is so much better, of course." ill- "Oh, these stories wouldn't frighten anyone. They're all told with tongue in cheek. Typically French."

"French, huh? That reminds me-that's what I came in for, something French. What's this book called?" She turned to the title page, Folk Tales from Provenge. Hmm, no author listed, I see. How about the story?"

"None there, either. All I know is, it's called, "The Little Devil." I don't know what the title is in French." She closed the a thump; the sound seemed excessively loud in so silent a room.

The attic door slammed loudly; he hadn't counted on the wind pulling it closed. Bathed in the warmth of the hall, he turned the corner, and froze involuntarily at the figure in the doorway-though his brain had long since identified it.

" Sorry, Walt. I wake you?"

Walter stumbled back to the bed, his eyes puffy and half shut.

Creases from the quilt were etched into the side of his face." Jesus," he muttered, a slackness still about his lips, "it's a good thing you did.

I was having one hell of a nightmare."

George followed him into the room and stood awkwardly by the bed; he wished that Walter had picked somewhere else to sleep. He had left a sour, liquory smell in the room.

"Boy, it'll take me a while to get over this one. It seemed so goddamned real."

George smiled." They all do, that's the point."

The other was not comforted." I can still picture the whole thing.

It was night, I remember-"

"Are you sure you want to talk about it? You'll forget faster if you put it out of your mind." He was bored by other people's dreams.

"No, man, you've got it backwards. You're supposed to talk about your nightmares. Helps you get rid of em." Walter shook his head and eased himself back on the quilt, the bedsprings twanging with each shift of his body." It was at night, you see, but early, just after the sun had gone down-don't ask me how I know -and I was driving home.

The countryside was exactly like it is around here."

"Here? You mean this part of the state?"

"Yeah. Only it was around seven at night, a few hours ago, and Joyce wasn't with me. I was alone in the car, and I wanted to get home. And somehow-you know how it is in dreams-I knew I'd lost my way. All the roads began looking the same, and I remember being very conscious of the fact that it was getting darker and darker all the time, and that if it got too dark I'd never make it. I was driving on this road that led through a tobacco field, just like the one we passed tonight-"

"Right, it's a big crop around here. We've got plantations just down the road."

"Yeah, crazy-looking things, laid out so flat and regular… But I could barely see the land. It was dark now, except for a little glow in the sky, and I was driving very, very slowly, trying to find my way.

You know, kind of following the beams of my headlights… And then way off in the field I noticed a farmer or someone, one of the hired hands, way

out there in the tobacco, so I pulled over to the side of the road and leaned across the front seat, you know, to ask directions… And I'd unrolled the window and was yelling to him when the man turned and made this odd movement with his head, kind of nodding at me, only I couldn't see the face, and then he came toward the car and bent down and I could see that it wasn't a man."

George gave him a moment's silence, then asked, "So what was it, then?"

The other rubbed his eyes." Oh, something pale, puffy, not completely formed… I don't know, it was only a dream."

"But, God damn it, you were just saying how realistic it was!" He found himself glancing toward the window, the shadow of the elm, and was angry.

"Well, you know how quickly you forget dreams, once you tell'em…

I don't know, I don't want to think about it anymore.

Let's go downstairs and have a drink."

George followed him down with the old ache building once again in his stomach, feeling betrayed by both the world and his own body.

"Something French, huh? Were you looking for anything special?" asked Doris. She slipped the storybook back onto the shelf.

Ellie grinned at her." You sound like you own the place."

"Well… I like books. Unlike my husband."

"I'll tell you, then-" Ellie surveyed the room, hands on hips.

"I'm really just looking for a French dictionary. Is there any order to this place? Anything approximating a reference section?"

" Right this way, madame."

While the books in the living room had been bound almost exclusively in leather, obviously chosen for their decorative quality, the collection in the library was strictly functional. Glossy new paperbacks stood pressed against ragged quartos whose titles had long since rotted away.

A pocket-sized Field Guide to the Mammals was lost in the shadow of an Audubon portfolio, and odd sets of fantasy pulps leaned against a sturdy black row of Arkham House editions, the gold imprint on their spines fading next to the magazines' garish primaries.

The reference section was relatively small, as if the collector had realized that one learns but little from books that try to tell too much.

There was, though, a French dictionary on the bottom shelf, side by side with something called, *The Book of Hidden Things*." I just wanted to look up a word from that stupid little pamphlet," Ellie explained, flipping through the pages." The one that came with those cards."

Doris watched her friend read." Found it?"

"Yes, icartde. It means isolated, alienated."

"Was that from your card?"

She nodded." That's me, I guess. The original alienated woman."

She gave a short laugh." Hey, look at this! Speak of the devil!" She pointed to the shelf a little above eye level, where three books on the Tarot stood huddled between a history of superstition and Gresham's *Nightmare Alley*. "I'll bring all three in," she decided; two were cheap paperbacks, the third a fat little volume with a brown paper cover.

"Milt's probably dying to leave, but first I'd like to give somebody a proper reading."

***

"Hungry! Aw, for Chrissake, not that again. I tell you I'm sick of that shit, I really am. You was just fed, not more than-" The man on the bed shook his

head "Oh, so all of a sudden you're not hungry, huh? You'd damn well better not be, because I'm leaving in just one second; I mean it. I don't have to stick around and listen to this shit." He paused, and made a big show of looking at his watch." Okay, you're not hungry.

A nod "Someone else is hungry?"

Another nod, more emphatic.

"Well, who the hell gives a- Oh, all tight, go ahead The foot was tapping another word. One, then six. P. Five. E Two, and then a noiseless tap. Twenty. T.

'All tight, that's it." The orderly rose; the tapping continued, but he stuffed the paper into his pocket." That's it, buster. I've wasted enough time on you as it is. You can knock the goddamn wall down for all I care!" He turned and strode down the hall, muttering to himself "Goddamn animal lover".

***

There was a Pyramid Spread and a Magic Seven Spread and a Wish Spread and a Life Spread and a Horoscope Spread and, according to one of the paperbacks, something called a "Sephiroth Spread I as well as a Kabala Spread and a Cross Spread-"covering," as Milton suggested, "damn near all the religions except a Star of David Spread"-but the Brackmans were in a hurry to leave soon, others having left already, and Milton had passed them all up for a simple "Yes or No Spread" that used only five cards.

"The two on the right are your past, the two on the left are your future, and the one in the middle is you now. We turn that over first."

Ellie read from one of the paperbacks; the clothbound volume had proved a disappointment, its author dampening their spirits at the outset by informing readers that the Tarot had been invented as recently as the 14OOs-worse, by charlatans-and that the seventy-eightcard deck was in fact two decks mistakenly grafted together, the one consisting of fifty-six playing cards, the Minor Arcana, the other of twenty-two picture cards, the Major Arcana, illustrating various magical symbols.

All fortune-telling properties, he maintained, were strictly illusory.

By the time Ellie had so informed the company, reading extended passages verbatim, she'd looked up to find that her audience had dwindled from more than a dozen to her husband, Sid and Doris Gerdts, and Paul Strauss. They were gathered around a bridge table set up near the front hallway.

"So you've had domestic illusions," Ellie was saying, "but now you've seen through them-"

"What the hell are 'domestic illusions'?" asked Paul. "-and you've set your sights higher, on philosophical aspirations." She had both paperbacks propped open before her, and-like the medieval's unquestioning faith in both Christian and Classical cosmologies-she saw no discrepancies in the two sets of predictions, at odds though they often were.

Milton's fond husband-smile had never wavered throughout her performance. "So much for my past," he said." Now for the present."

He turned over the center card." This is me now."

Gerdts chuckled." Looks like you're a girl, Miltie!" Indeed, the card was The Queen of Pentacles; surrounded as she was by foliage, sitting in a meadow beneath a rosy trellis, she seemed the most feminine of all the queens.

Milton forced a laugh." Ah, what do these cards know?" he said.

He reached for the first of the future-cards.

"No, wait," said his wife, "I'm sure there's a reading for you in this.

Remember, it's only a symbol." She looked from book to book.

"See? Just listen: It's a symbol of fertility-" Milt's eyebrows rose -and charity. It says you're of Libra temperament, whatever that is "Oh, God," said Paul, "not astrology too!" -and therefore have a deep love of justice." She looked up; her eyes met Milton's." That part's true, anyway."

"Yes."

"And now the future," said Gerdts." Come on, Milt." The other reached for the card.

"Now hold on a second," said Ellie." Remember, boys, this one's the near future, because it's next to the center… And the last is the distant future."

"Got you." He turned over the first card.

"You've got it upside down," said Doris." Here, let me-"

"No, leave it be," Ellie ordered." The meaning changes if it's that way." She scanned the illustrations in the guidebook, then shrugged.

"Nothing like that in here. This book's no damned good." She looked in the other, explaining, "All decks have basically the same idea, but the actual pictures can be different. Like chess sets, it says here.

Sometimes a queen is a beautiful young woman: other times she's shown as an Egyptian goddess, or a nun, or a naked girl." Her eyes kept scanning the pages." But I really don't see anything like that.

And no reference number on the bottom; that makes it harder to identify.

What's it look like to you?"

"Like something hanging from a tree," said Doris. "A bat or a sloth."

"You know, those things that get the fungus on them She turned the card around." And right side up it looks like-" She frowned.

"A sloth on the ground," said Milton." Seen from the rear."

"Like those prehistoric things," added Paul." Giant ground sloths."

There was, in fact, something ancient in the squat gray form, crawling along a road beneath a starry sky, its head no more than a bulge in the background.

"Is there a table of contents?" asked Milton. His wife nodded.

"Look up The Sloth. Or better yet, The Beast."

"It reminds me of that Maine folk tale," said Gerdts." The one about the hunter who shot the bear and skinned it, and went off with the hide, leaving his own coat behind… He turns around and he sees the bear following him, wearing his coat. That's what it is, it's a skinned bear." . "Could it be the card for Death?" asked his wife." It looks like Death to me."

Gerdts searched through the pack." Afraid not, Dorie. This one's Old Mr. Death, see?" The skull's eyes stared sightlessly out at them.

"I've looked all through these"-Ellie laid aside the paperbacks and there's nothing like it." She began leafing through the third book ." Maybe it's from another deck."

Milton turned it over. Its back bore the same design as the other cards.

Ellie sighed." This book's no good either. I may have to do this by process of elimination." Paul glanced surreptitiously at his watch."

I'll figure it out," she said." Don't worry."

"I'm not worrying," said Milton.

"Looks like I'm gonna have to leave," said Paul." Tell me how it all comes out." He looked around for the host and hostess.

"I'm sure it isn't a number card, or a royal card," said Ellie, "so that means it has to be one of the Trumps Major."

"Ah, I've got it," said Milton." Satan."

"But it hardly looks like "It must be. I've looked through the whole pack, and there's no Satan card."

"Well…" She looked down at the card in question." Yes, maybe there is the hint of a horn, around the other side… but would Satan really be facing

away?"

"Maybe displaying his rump for us to kiss," said Doris. She blushed.

"Last call for quiche," yelled Phyllis from across the room." Get it while it's hot!"

The Goodhues and the Fitzgeralds had left, having spent the evening in conversation with no one but themselves, and Paul was putting on his coat. He paused for one final mouthful of quiche.

The Gerdtses drifted toward the food table, more out of obligation than hunger, and-after making sure his wife was "absolutely stuffed"-Milton joined them, leaving Ellie alone with the cards.

Yes, the gray shape probably represented Satan; the mystery was solved.

Yet it was all rather exasperating, for Satan in one book was a Mosaic-looking deity with a flowing beard; in another, a black magician; and in the third, a sullen, goatlike figure officiating at the unholy matrimony of two disciples. The thing that shambled across the card resembled none of them; it was simply, as her husband had said, The Beast.

She was thinking of the Little Devil of the storybook le Petit Diable, she supposed it must be called-when her hand, straying to the remaining card in Milton's spread, unthinkingly turned it face up, revealing Satan upon his throne, the two naked mortals joined in wedlock before him.

The Lazaruses had just left, and Janet Mulholland backed away from the cold blast of air that dropped toward her legs as the door swung shut.

Her husband was helping her with her coat, and Mike Carlinsky was searching in the closet for his fiancées gloves. Arthur Faschman was standing by the window with Herb, watching the exodus.

"Getting late," said Herb.

Faschman looked at his watch." Wow, I'll say! Hey, Judy," he called,

"do you have any idea what time it is?"

" After twelve. So what?"

"So I've gotta drive Andy down to the orthodontist tomorrow morning, that's what. Unless you want to do it." He turned back to Herb."

Listen to her. Last of the swingers. You ought to hear her the morning after. Better yet, you ought to see her!" He looked at his watch, more nervously this time." Hey, how is it outside? Not raining or anything, I hope…" He peered out the window.

"It's cold out there," said Milton." George said it may even snow.

El and I were all set to go, but now we're thinking of staying over."

"I must say, he's carrying that gentleman farmer bit a little too far," said Faschman." I mean, just look. Isn't that a scarecrow out there?"

"Where?" Milton rubbed his fist against the glass. The light in the living room was strong, and he could see little more than his own reflection." Where, in the yard?"

"No, way the hell out there, over on the other side of the field."

He tapped on part of the pane; it was smeared with condensation.

"See? Ah, too late, the moon's behind a cloud. You'll pass it when you leave. You really going to stay all night?"

"Sure, why not? Free breakfast."

"Yeah," said Judy Faschman, coming up behind them, "if you don't mind leftover quiche."

Carefully Ellie laid out the cards. The Sun, The Moon, The Star Judgment, Temperance, and Justice… She'd been standing here half an hour, checking, and they were all there. The Emperor, The Hermit, The Hierophant… Strength, The World, and The Wheel of Fortune.

All twenty-two of them, the Trumps Major, each with its message. Satan, and Death, and The Hanged Man… and even The Fool. (Why did she always associate that with poor George? He'd been so out of sorts tonight.) All had been accounted for; she'd matched them all with the illustrations in the book. What, then, was this additional card? The green cardboard box said, "78 cartes." That, and the brand name, Grand Etteilla-derived, the book had said, from Alliette, the unsavory magician who'd introduced them to the French court-and below it the seal of the printer, B. P. Grimaud, of Marseilles. Nothing about an extra trump, a spare, a bonus, a joker She studied it again. She hadn't noticed before, built in places the picture was rather disturbingly detailed. She could make out the bulletlike contours of a head just about to turn in her direction, and an upraised front claw, shadowy against the night. Something in the configuration of the stars in the background reminded her of the sky outside the windows…

Hastily she placed the cards back in the box, slipping the gray hunched thing well into the middle of the pack, as if to cage it. The twenty-third trump, she suspected, was no joker.

"And here I thought you were going to stay over," said Phyllis.

"Aw, Phyl, come on. Admit it, you're relieved to get us out of the way.

One less bed to make in the morning." Milton leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek." My wife says she's tired, and when MY wife says she's tired that means it's home for us." The excuse sounded lame;

Ellie's sudden decision to leave, without even the offer to help clean up, had been rude.

"You sure you don't want one more before you go?" asked George. (Where had he come from?) He jiggled his drink invitingly, but it looked like the drink he'd been sipping all night.

Milton shook his head, smiling sheepishly." Honest, kids, I just want to say, before I hit the road, that if I got a little out of hand tonight, you know, if I said anything I shouldn't have, well, I never was much good at holding my liquor and "It was a pleasure, old buddy, honest." George slapped him on

the arm; he seemed to be rallying." If you said anything nasty, I sure didn't hear it."

Relief showed in Milton's face." Yeah, well, thanks a lot. I mean it.

I love this place and I had a great time here tonight." He reached for George's hand." And I just hope you and Phyl are-"

"Honey!" Ellie's voice came from the driveway." I'm standing out here in the cold, and you've got the car keys."

"Christ, yeah, gotta run." He looked over his shoulder." Sorry El's a little cranky, but you know these women. Can't keep'em up past midnight!" Pulling up his collar, he flashed Phyllis a big grin." She really had a great time, and you can bet that "Honey!"

Milton shrugged." Bye now." He leaned into the hall." G'night, everybody. See you soon." Then, stepping outside: "Whoops, get away from the door, Phyl, you'll catch cold." His footsteps crunched on the gravel.

Silence lay on the room; conversation had sputtered and died.

The men took George's yawn as a signal to depart, but they waited for their wives to finish helping Phyllis clean up, careful to make no acknowledgment of the late hour. Allen Goldberg sat smoking disconsolately on the couch, watching Cissy Hawkins fuss over the few remaining platters of canapés and fruit; as the only remaining bachelor, Paul Strauss having made his exit, Allen was expected to drive Cissy home.

He glanced toward Joyce Applebaum, who marched toward the kitchen carrying two bowls of clam dip and the remains of a cheesecake. She was a lot more attractive than Cissy. Her husband lay sprawled in the big armchair, his face red from drink and fatigue; he'd slept through most of the party." Come on, baby, hurry it up," he said.

Baby. All the men remarked on that; Walter had only been married a few months.

When Cissy offered to scrub the kitchen floor, Phyllis had to dissuade her." Or I can help dry dishes," the girl pleaded.

"Honestly, Cis, you've been a terrific help all evening and there's nothing left to do." She withdrew her hands from the sink and shook them free of suds." Now go back in there and relax, and we'll make sure you have a ride home."

Relieved, Cissy returned to the living room, only to face the sullen stares of the men. Awkwardly she moved to the bridge table and began tidying up-then, to busy herself, opened the green cardboard box. The Six of Swords was on top, followed by The Tower. She would put them in order, she decided, just as, in her apartment, she'd spent hours arranging and rearranging her few dozen books. Swords in this pile, cups in that, picture cards over there…

The picture cards were prettiest, but she wasn't sure how to arrange them until she saw the tiny numerals at the bottom. Judgment, number 20, the naked people sprouting from their graves like com -why, you could see the woman's nipples-and number 7, The Chariot, would be before it, a black sphinx and a white sphinx roped together, and then 10, The Wheel of Fortune with the white sphinx (the same?) perched on top, and 12, The Hanged Man, with his knowing smirk, and then The Fool, inexplicably numbered with a zero-perhaps that was a mistake, and she put it aside-and 8, Strength, the girl with what was that?-a lion, and then The Moon, 18, shedding its light onto the open field, dogs howling below it, and then a huge gray animal staring malevolently at something beyond the edge of the card; they'd left off the number and she put it aside with The Fool, and then Temperance, number 14, which made her smile because her grandmother had been in the WCTU… She wondered if, to some people, her own beliefs appeared as ridiculous, and continued counting: The World, The Lovers, and Death… When would he ask her if she needed a ride?

Allen had made the mistake of watching her, and when she looked up his eyes met hers. As if on cue, he stubbed out his cigarette and got to his feet." Uh, Cissy, do you need a lift home?"

When George came into the kitchen, his wife whispered, "So are they planning to stay all night?"

He shrugged." You know Herb-last to come, last to leave. He has that look on him, too, that philosophical-discussion look." Phylhis sighed."

But you know, I wouldn't mind him staying awhile. I'm not really tired."

"Well Tammie is, and so am I. If you two want to talk all night that's up to you. I'll put out some things in the guest room for them, but after that I'm going straight to bed." She eyed him accusingly." Of course you're not tired, you haven't been running around all day. You spent half the party hiding in the bathroom."

Back in the living room Herb greeted him with, "You know, George, what this place needs is a nice little fire. That really would have made the evening, to have a fire going."

"Yeah, but they're a lot of bother." For a minute he'd thought Herb had suggested burning the house down.

"But what's a fireplace for if you don't build a fire on a cold night?"

"To tell you the truth, I'm not even sure if this chimney works. I'll have to get somebody in to check the flue." The bare fireplace looked like an empty stage, a performer still waiting in the wings." Besides, Phyllis threw out all the firewood, and if you want any more you've got to walk half a mile to the woodshed"-he gestured toward a window- "all the way around back."

Herb stood." I'm game," he said." Just tell me where it is."

Tammie came out of the downstairs bathroom, her hair patted back into shape, the tiredness around her eyes concealed." And where do you think you're going?" she said.

" To get some firewood," said Herb." Build us a fire."

"Herb here's trying to prove he's an outdoorsman," explained George." I made fun of him earlier tonight-I mean, when you two got lost on the way

here-so now he's out to show me up."

Tammie pouted." Really, honey, everyone's tired and ready for bed... And all of a sudden you have to build a fire?"

"I'm not tired," said Herb, on the defensive." Anyway, a stack of lumber by the andirons would brighten up some atmosphere."

"Fine," said George, in no mood to argue." You're hired. You're our new interior decorator. Now go through the kitchen, out the door to the greenhouse, but before you reach it turn right, go down the steps, and you'll see a path by the back of the house. Follow that to the garage and you'll see the woodshed, out near the hedges. I'm pretty sure it's unlocked."

"Better put a coat on, honey."

"I don't need it." Herb strode toward the kitchen.

"How'd you like Mike's fiancée?" asked Tammie when they were alone. She reached for a cigarette." Think she's right for him?" 'Oh, I'd met her before. She's okay. It was Ellie who introduced them, you know."

"No kidding! Where, at the beach last summer?"

"Yeah."

"And what did you think of her tonight, lecturing out of that book?"

"Oh, she just gets a little carried away with the sound of her own voice, that's all." He noticed the books she'd left on the bridge table, and went to get them. They belonged in the library; only leatherbound books for the living room." Ellie's a strong-minded woman." she bosses Milt around? When she "I'll say. Did you see how decided it was time to leave, that was it, he had to go. Just like-" She looked toward the window." Well, here comes Herb with the firewood."

"What, already? No, he must have gotten lost. Wonder why he's round the front." Taking a deep breath, he opened the green corn box.

The cards spilled out onto the table.

Phyllis entered the room, wiping her hands on a dish towel.

He turned over several minor trumps, then a picture card, The Tower.

Lightning flashed, stone walls crumbled, and beyond them raged the sea.

He pushed it to one side. Somehow he wished that Herb had not gone out." Hey honey, did you lock the back door?" "Not yet. Why?" She walked to the front window and drew the curtains. "Anybody ready for bed? I'll get some clean linen out."

"Now you're sure it's no bother?" asked Tammie. She stood.

"Herb and I can make do with these couches, you know." They heard the crunch of gravel outside.

"Nonsense! We'll go upstairs and get the room ready, and by the time we come down the men'll have a fire going." George didn't look up; he was absorbed in sorting through the cards, searching for one card in particular." And we'll all have some hot chocolate. Won't that be nice?"

From outside came a high-pitched whistling; something thudded against the door. Tammie, who was closest, walked into the front hall.

As her hand fastened on the doorknob, George gave a little gasp; he staggered back, dropping the card and what glared from it, and as she swung open the door he screamed, "No, Tammie, no!" But it was already too late; a gray shape filled the doorway, blotting out the night-and now, just as in the card, it turned to face him.

Children of the Kingdom

"Mischief is their occupation, malice their habit, murder their sport, and blasphemy their delight."

—Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer*

"They are everywhere, those creatures."

—Derleth, *The House on Curwen Street*

"It taught me the foolishness of not being afraid."

—rape victim, New York City

On a certain spring evening several years ago, after an unsuccessful interview in Boston for a job I'd thought was mine, I missed the last train back to New York and was forced to take the eleven-thirty bus. It proved to be a "local," wending its way through the shabby little cities of southern New England and pulling into a succession of dimly lit Greyhound stations far from the highway, usually in the older parts of town—the decaying ethnic neighborhoods, the inner-city slums, the ghettos. I had a bad headache, and soon fell asleep. When I awoke I felt disoriented. All the other passengers were sleeping. I didn't know what time it was, but hesitated to turn on the light and look at my watch lest it disturb the man next to me. Instead, I looked out the window. We were passing through the heart of yet another shabby, nameless city, moving past the same gutted buildings I'd been seeing all night in my dreams, the same lines of cornices and rooftops, empty windows, gaping doorways. In the patches of darkness, familiar shapes seemed strange. Mailboxes and fire hydrants sprouted like tropical plants. Yet somehow it was stranger beneath the streetlights, where garbage cast long shadows on the sidewalk, and vacant lots hid glints of broken glass among the weeds. I remembered what I'd read of those great Mayan cities standing silent and abandoned in the Central American jungle, with no clue to where the inhabitants had gone. Through the window I could now see crumbling rows of tenements, an ugly red-brick housing

project, some darkened and filthy-looking shops with alleys blocked by iron gates. Here and there a solitary figure would turn to watch the bus go by. Except for my reflection, I saw not one white face. A pair of little children threw stones at us from behind a fortress made of trash; a grown man stood pissing in the street like an animal, and watched us with amusement as we passed. I wanted to be out of this benighted place, and prayed that the driver would get us through quickly. I longed to be back in New York. Then a street sign caught my eye, and I realized that I'd already arrived. This was my own neighborhood; my home was only three streets down and just across the avenue. As the bus continued south I caught a fleeting glimpse of the apartment building where, less than half a block away, my wife lay awaiting my return.

Less than half a block can make a difference in New York. Different worlds can co-exist side by side, scarcely intersecting. There are places in Manhattan where you can see a modern high-rise, with its terraces and doormen and well-appointed lobby, towering white and immaculate above some soot-stained little remnant of the city's past—a tenement built during the Depression, lines of garbage cans in front, or a nineteenth-century brownstone gone to seed, its brickwork defaced by graffiti, its front door yawning open, its hallway dark, narrow, and forbidding as a tomb. Perhaps the two buildings will be separated by an alley; perhaps not even that. The taller one's shadow may fall across the other, blotting out the sun; the other may disturb the block with loud music, voices raised in argument, the gnawing possibility of crime. Yet to all appearances the people of each group will live their lives without acknowledging the other's existence. The poor will keep their rats, like secrets, to themselves; the cooking smells, the smells of poverty and sickness and backed-up drains, will seldom pass beyond their windows. The sidewalk in front may be lined with the idle and unshaven, men with T-shirts and dark skins and a gaze as sharp as razors, singing, or trading punches, or disputing, perhaps, in Spanish; or they may sit in stony silence on the stoop, passing round a bottle in a paper bag. They are rough-looking and impetuous, these men; but they will seldom leave their kingdom for the alien world next door. And those who inhabit that alien world will move with a certain wariness when they find themselves on the street, and will hurry past the others without meeting their eyes.

My grandfather, Herman Lauterbach, was one of those people who could move in either world. Though his Brooklyn apartment had always seemed a haven of middle-class respectability, at least for as long as I knew him, whatever refinements it displayed were in fact the legacy of his second wife; Herman himself was more at home among the poor. He, too, had been poor for most of his life—a bit of a radical, I suspect—and always thought of my father, his son-in-law, as "nothing but a goddamn stuffshirt" simply because my father had an office job. (As his beloved daughter's only child I was spared such criticisms, although I'm sure he found my lackluster academic career a disappointment and my chosen field, The Puritan Heritage, a bore.) His attitudes never changed, even when, nearing seventy, having outlived two exasperated wives, he himself was forced to don a necktie and go to work for the brother of an old friend in a firm that manufactured watch casings.

He had always been a comical, companionable man, fond of women, jokes, and holidays, but forty-hour weeks went hard with him and soured his temper. So did the death of my mother the following year. Afterward, things were not the same; he was no longer quite so endearing. One saw a more selfish side, a certain hardness, like that of a child who has grown up in the street. Yet one inevitably forgave him, if only because of his age and lack of consequence, and because there still hung about him a certain air of comedy, as if it was his doom to provide the material for other people's anecdotes. There was, for example, his violent altercation with the driver of a Gravesend Bay bus, which my grandfather had boarded in the belief that it went to Bay Ridge; and then there was the episode in Marinaro's Bar, where jokes about the Mafia were not taken lightly. Several weeks later came a highly injudicious argument with the boss's son, less than half his age, over the recent hike in transit fares for senior citizens, and whether this entitled my grandfather to a corresponding increase in pay. Finally, when the two of them nearly came to blows over an equally minor disagreement —whether or not the city's impending bankruptcy was the fault of Mayor Beame, whom my grandfather somewhat resembled—everyone agreed that it was time for the old man to retire.

For the next three years he managed to get by on his modest savings, augmented by Social Security and regular checks from my father, now

remarried and living in New Jersey. Then, suddenly, his age caught up with him: on May 4, 1977, while seated in his kitchen watching the first of the Frost-Nixon interviews (and no doubt shaking his fist at the television set), he suffered a major stroke, toppled backward from his chair, and had to be hospitalized for nearly a month. He was, at this time, eighty-three years old.

Or at least that was what he admitted to. We could never actually be sure, for in the past he'd been known to subtract as much as a decade when applying for a job, and to add it back, with interest, when applying for Golden Age discounts at a local movie house. Whatever the case, during his convalescence it became clear that he was in no shape to return to Brooklyn, where he'd been living on the third floor of a building without elevators. Besides, like his once-robust constitution, the neighborhood had deteriorated over the years; gangs of black and Puerto Rican youths preyed on the elderly of all races, especially those living alone, and an ailing old widower was fair game. On the other hand, he was not yet a candidate for a nursing home, at least not the elaborate kind with oxygen tents and cardiographs attached. What he needed was a rest home. As his doctor explained in private to my wife and me on our second visit, my grandfather was by no means permanently incapacitated; why, just look at Pasteur, who after a series of fifty-eight strokes had gone on to make some of his greatest discoveries. ("And who knows?" the doctor said, "maybe your granddad'll make a few discoveries of his own.") According to the prognosis he was expected to be on his feet within a week or two. Perhaps before that time he would have another stroke; likely, though, it would come later; more than likely it would kill him. Until then, however, he'd be alert and responsive and sufficiently ambulant to care for himself: he would not be walking with his usual speed, perhaps, but he'd be walking.

My grandfather put it more succinctly. "What the hell you think I am," he said, voice gravelly with age, when the question of a rest home was raised, "some vegetable in a wheelchair?" Struggling to sit up in bed, he launched into an extended monologue about how he'd rather die alone and forgotten on Skid Row than in a "home"; but for all its Sturm and Drang the speech sounded curiously insincere, and I had the impression that he'd been rehearsing it for years. No doubt his pride was at stake; when I assured him that what we had in mind was not some thinly disguised terminal ward, nor

anything like a day-care center for the senile and decrepit, but rather a sort of boardinghouse where he could live in safety among people his own age, people as active as he was, he calmed down at once. I could see that the idea appealed to him; he had always thrived on conversation, jawboning, even aimless chatter, and the prospect of some company—especially that of fellow retirees with time on their hands—was an inviting one. The truth is, he'd been lonely out in Brooklyn, though of course he would never have admitted it. For my part I was feeling rather guilty; I hadn't come to see him as often as I should have. From now on, I told him, things would be different: I would find him a place in Manhattan, a place where I could visit him once or twice a week. I'd even take him out to dinner, when I got the chance.

He appeared to think it over. Then—for my sake, I think (and somehow I found this horribly depressing)—he screwed his face into a roguish grin, like a small boy boasting to an adult. "Make sure there are plenty of good-looking dames around," he said, "and you got yourself a deal."

The following weekend, with this qualified blessing in mind, Karen and I set about looking for a place. The press had recently brought to light a series of scandals involving various institutions for the aged, and we were particularly anxious to find a reputable one. By Saturday afternoon we'd discovered that many of the private homes were more expensive than we'd counted on—as much as two or three hundred dollars a week—and that in most of them the supervision was too strict; they resembled nothing so much as tiny, smiling prisons. Grandfather would never stand for being cooped up inside all day; he liked to wander. Another, run by nuns, was comfortable, clean, and open to non-Catholics, but its residents were in no condition to feed themselves, much less join in human conversation. These were the unreclaimables, lapsed into senescence; my grandfather, we hoped, would seem positively vigorous beside them.

Finally, early Sunday evening, on the recommendation of a friend, we visited a place on West 81st Street, scarcely a dozen blocks from where we lived. It was called, somewhat optimistically, the Park West Manor for Adults, even though it was rather less than a manor house and nowhere near the park. The owner was a certain Mr. Fetterman, whom we never actually

met; it later turned out that he, too, was a bit of a crook, though never in ways that directly affected us. I gather from my wife, who, as accountant for a publishing firm, has always had a better head for business, that the home was part of some statewide franchise operation with vague ties to local government. According to the agreement—common, she informs me—my grandfather's rent was to be paid for out of his now-meager savings; when they were depleted (as, indeed, they would be in a year or so) the cost would be borne by Medicaid for the rest of his life.

The building itself, of dirty red ornamental brick, occupied the south side of the street between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue, a block and a half from the Museum of Natural History. It consisted of two wings, each nine stories tall, connected by a narrow, recessed entranceway several steps down from the sidewalk. The place seemed respectable enough, though at first sight it was not particularly impressive, especially at the end of the day, with the sun sinking behind the Hudson and long shadows darkening the block. The pavement in front of the building had recently been torn up for some kind of sewer work, and huge brown metal pipes lay stacked on either side like ammunition. My wife and I had to step across a series of planks to reach the front door. Inside it, just before the lobby, was an alcove with a battered wooden desk, behind which, seemingly stupefied with boredom, sat a wrinkled old black man in a guard's uniform—the sort of man one sees at banks these days, ineffectually directing people to the appropriate tellers. He nodded and let us pass through. No doubt he thought he recognized us; it's said that, to whites, all blacks look alike, and years in various city classrooms have convinced me that the reverse is true as well.

The lobby wasn't much of an improvement. Like most lobbies, it was dim, depressing, and cold. The rear wall was lined by a mirror, so that, on entering, my wife and I found ourselves confronted by a rather discouraged-looking little couple approaching from across the room, the woman frowning at the man, no doubt for some trifling thing he had just said, the man glancing with increasing frequency at his watch. To the couple's left ran a long, ornate mantelpiece overhanging a blank expanse of wall where a fireplace should have been. Grouped around this nonexistent fireplace were half a dozen caved-in leather chairs and a pair of dusty rubber plants sagging wearily in their pots, their leaves reflected in the mirror and, on a

smaller scale, in the painting hanging just above the mantel: a framed reproduction of Rousseau's *Children of the Kingdom*, the primitive figures peering out at us like a ring of ghosts, their faces pale and impassive against the violets, reds, and greens of the surrounding jungle. The colors were faded, as if from having been stared at by generations of residents.

It was the dinner hour. The lobby was deserted; from somewhere to the right came the sound of voices and the clank of pots and plates, accompanied by a scraping of chairs and the smell of boiled meat. We moved toward it, following the right-hand corridor past a series of turns until we came to a pair of wooden doors with windows in the top. Karen, boldened by fatigue, pushed her way through. Before us stretched the dining room, barely more than half filled, the diners grouped around tables of various shapes and designs. It reminded me of the mess hall at summer camp, as if my fellow campers had aged and withered right there in their seats without ever having gained appreciably in size. Even the waiters looked old: a few, hurrying up the aisles, still sported oily black pompadours, but most looked as if they could easily have traded places with the people they served. White hair was the rule here, with pink skull showing through. This was as true for the women as the men, since by this age the sexes had once more begun to merge; indeed, like babies, the individuals in the room were hard to tell apart. Nor were they any more inclined than children to disguise their curiosity; dozens of old pink heads swiveled in our direction as we stood there in the doorway. We were intruders; I felt as if we'd blundered into a different world. Then I saw the expectation in their faces, and felt doubly bad: each of them had probably been hoping for a visitor, a son or daughter or grandchild, and must have been keenly disappointed by every new arrival that was not the one awaited.

A small, harried-looking man approached us and identified himself as the assistant manager. He looked as if he was about to scold us for having arrived during dinner—he, too, probably assumed we were there to visit someone—but he brightened immediately when we explained why we'd come. "Follow me," he said, moving off at a kind of dogtrot. "I'll show you the place from top to bottom." In the noise and hubbub of the dining room I hadn't caught his name, but as soon as he started toward the nearest exit, my wife and I in tow, a plaintive chorus of "Mr. Calzone" arose behind us.

He ignored it and pushed on through the door; I suppose he was glad of the diversion.

We found ourselves in the kitchen, all iron pots and steam, with cooks in white T-shirts and white-jacketed waiters shouting at one another in Spanish. “This used to be kosher,” shouted Calzone, “but they cut all that out.” I assured him that my grandfather liked his bacon as well as the next man. “Oh, we don’t give ’em bacon too often,” he said, taking me literally, “but they really go for the pork chops.” My wife seemed satisfied, and nodded at the dishwashers and the ranks of aluminum cabinets. As for me, I wasn’t sure just what to look for, but am happy to report I saw no worm-eggs and not one dead cat.

Calzone was as good as his word. From the kitchen he conducted us “up top” to the ninth floor via a clanging old elevator of the self-service type, with the numbers beside the buttons printed so large—in raised numerals nearly an inch high—that even a blind man could have run it. (Its speed was such that, had one of the home’s frailer residents preferred to take the stairs, she would probably have arrived in time to meet us.) The rooms on the ninth floor, most of them unoccupied, were shabby but clean, with private bathrooms and plenty of closet space. Grandfather would have nothing to complain about. In fact, with its boarders all downstairs at dinner, the place seemed more a college dormitory than an old-folks’ home. Aside from the oversized elevator panel and the shiny new aluminum railings we’d noticed everywhere—in easy reach of stairways, tubs, and toilets—about the only concession to age appeared to be a sign-up sheet my wife came across on a bulletin board in the second-floor “game room,” for those who wished to make an appointment at some community medical center over on Columbus Avenue.

Our tour ended with the laundry room in the basement. It was hot and uncomfortable and throbbed with the echoes of heavy machinery, like the engine room of a freighter; you could almost feel the weight of the building pressing down on you. The air seemed thick, as if clogged with soapsuds, and moisture dripped from a network of flaking steam pipes suspended from the ceiling. Against one side stood four coin-operated dryers, staring balefully at four squat Maytag washers ranged along the opposite wall. One

of the washers, in the farthest corner, appeared to be having a breakdown. It was heaving back and forth on its base like something frantic to escape, a pair of red lights blinking in alarm above the row of switches. From somewhere in its belly came a frenzied churning sound, as if the thing were delivering itself of a parasite, or perhaps just giving birth. A man in a sweat-stained T-shirt was on his knees before it, scowling at an exposed bit of circuitry where a panel had been removed. Beside him stood an open tool kit, with tools scattered here and there across the concrete floor. He was introduced to us as Reynaldo "Frito" Ley, the building's superintendent, but he barely had time to look up, and when he did the scowl stayed on his face. "She acting up again," he told the assistant manager, in a thick Hispanic accent. "I think somebody messing with the 'lectric wire." Reaching around back to the wall, he yanked out the plug, and the machine ground noisily to a halt.

"Maybe it's rats," I said, feeling somewhat left out. He looked at me indignantly, and I smiled to show that I'd been joking.

But Calzone was taking no chances. "Believe me," he said quickly, "that's one thing they don't complain about." He ran a hand through his thinning hair. "Sure, I know, this building ain't exactly new, and okay, maybe we'll get a little bitty roach now and then, that's only natural. I mean, you're not gonna find a single building in the whole damned city that hasn't got one or two of them babies, am I right? But rats, never. We run a clean place."

"Rats not gonna bother my machines," added the superintendent. "They got no business here. Me, I think it was *los ninos*. Kids."

"Kids?" said my wife and I in unison, with Calzone half a beat behind.

"You mean children from the neighborhood?" asked Karen. She had just been reading a series about the revival of youth gangs on the West Side, after more than a decade of peace. "What would they want in a place like this? How could they get in?"

He shrugged. "I don' know, lady. I don' see them. I only know is hard to keep them out. They all the time looking for money. Come down here, try to get the quarters from machines. No good, so they got to go break

something—cut up hoses in the back, pull the plug... That kind, they do anything."

Calzone stepped between them. "Don't worry, Mrs. Klein. It's not what you're thinking. What Frito means is, on weekends like this you get people coming in to visit relatives, and sometimes they bring the little kids along. And before you know it the kids are getting bored, and they're running up and down the halls or playing in the elevator. We're trying to put a stop to it, but it's nothing serious. Just pranks, that's all." Moving to the door, he opened it and ushered us outside.

Behind us the superintendent appeared rather annoyed, but when my wife looked back questioningly he turned away. We left him sulking in front of his machine.

"Craziest thing I ever heard of," muttered Calzone, as he led us back to the elevator. "The kids in this neighborhood may cause a bit of trouble now and then, but they sure as hell ain't causing it in here!" The elevator door slid shut with a clang. "Look, I'm not gonna lie to you. We've had our share of problems. I mean, who hasn't, right? But if we've had any break-ins here it's the first time I've ever heard of it. Fact is, we've just beefed up our security, and there's no way anyone from outside's getting in. Believe me, your granddad's gonna be as safe here as anywhere else in New York."

Since that very morning's *Times* had carried the story of a wealthy widow and her maid found strangled in their East 62nd Street town house, these words were hardly reassuring.

Nor was my wife's expression when we got out of the elevator. She nudged me with her elbow. "I'd hate to think what the security was like before they beefed it up," she said. Calzone pretended not to hear.

The first battalions of old men and women were marching unsteadily from the dining room as the two of us bid him good-bye. "Come back again and I'll show you our new TV lounge," he called after us, retiring to his little office just beyond the stairs. As soon as he'd closed the door, I approached a pair of well-fed-looking old women who were shuffling arm-in-arm

across the lobby. The stouter one had hair as blue as the veins that lined her forehead. Gazing up at me, she broke into a slightly bewildered smile.

I cleared my throat. “Pardon me, but would you two ladies say this is a safe place to live? I mean, from the standpoint of the neighborhood?” Silence. The smile, the gaze, never wavered.

“Mrs. Hirschfeld doesn’t hear so good,” explained the other, tightening her grip on the woman’s arm. “Even with the new battery you have to shout a little.” She spoke with her eyes cast demurely downward, avoiding mine. Her hair was tied in a coquettish little bun. Who knows, I thought, Grandfather might like her. She told me her name was Mrs. Rosenzweig. She and Mrs. Hirschfeld were roommates. “Elsie’s very happy here,” she said, “and me, I can’t complain. Three years already we’ve been here, and never any trouble.” The lashes fluttered. “But of course, we never go outside.”

They moved off together toward the elevator, leaning on one another for support. “Well, what do you think?” I asked my wife, as we headed for the exit in front.

She shrugged. “He’s your grandfather.”

Emerging from the lobby, we found ourselves once more in the presence of the guard, slumped glassy-eyed behind his desk. Here he is in the flesh, I thought, Calzone’s beefed-up security. He nodded sleepily to us as we passed.

Outside, dusk had fallen on the block. To the west lay the familiar trees and benches of Broadway, with TV showrooms, banks, and Chinese restaurants. Copperware and cappuccino-makers gleamed in Zabar’s window; Sunday browsers chatted by a bookstall on the corner. “Anyway,” I said, “it’s better than Brooklyn.” But when we turned east I wasn’t so sure. The building next door was a six-story tenement ribbed with fire escapes and a crumbling succession of ledges. On the front stoop, beneath a rust-stained “No Loitering” sign, sat a conclave of bored-looking young men, one with a gold earring, one fiddling with the dial of a radio as big as an attaché case. I wished we didn’t have to walk past them.

“They look like they’re posing for a group photo,” I said hopefully, taking my wife’s hand.

“Yeah—Attica, Class of 1980.”

We moved by them silently, drawing hostile glares. Behind us, with a blare of trumpets, the radio exploded into “Soul Soldier.” Another group of teenagers was gathered in front of a closed-up shop on the corner of 81st and Amsterdam. “Checks Cashed,” a corrugated metal sign proclaimed, and below it, on a faded piece of cardboard taped in-side the window, “Food Stamps Sold Here.” The place was dark and empty, the window grey with dust.

Snap out of it, I told myself, the neighborhood’s not so bad. Just another culture or two, that’s all it was, and no worse here than where I lived, half a mile farther uptown. I noted the ancient public library, a shoe-repair shop, a pawnshop with guitars and watches in the window, a place where Haitian magazines were sold, a Puerto Rican social club, a shop whose sign read “Barber” on one side and “Barberia” on the other. Several botanicas, shut for the day behind steel gates, displayed windows full of painted plaster figures: Jesus, and Mary, a bearded black man brandishing a snake, an angel with a dagger in his hand. All wore haloes.

Still, the people of the neighborhood did not. The crime rate, in fact, had been climbing that year, and while Park West Manor seemed as good a place as any for my grandfather, I had doubts about the safety of the block. As my wife and I walked home that night, heading up Columbus with the lights of Sunday traffic in our eyes, I thought of the old brick building receding behind us into the shadows of West 81st, and of the doorways, stoops, and street corners surrounding it where unsmiling black youths waited like a threat. I worried about whether they might somehow sneak inside, and about all the damage they might cause—although in view of what actually occurred, these fears now seem, to say the least, rather ironic.

Wednesday, June 8, 1977

If heaven is really populated by the souls of the dead, with their earthly personalities and intellect surviving intact, then the place must be almost as

depressing as an old-folks' home. The angels may handle their new wings with a certain finesse, and their haloes may glow bright as gold, but the heads beneath them must be pretty near as empty as the ones I saw the first time I visited my grandfather at Park West Manor. Around me, in the game room, old men and women played leisurely hands of canasta or poker or gin, or sat watching in silence as two of their number shuffled round a pool table, its worn and faded surface just above the spectators' sight. One old man stood talking to himself in the corner; others merely dozed. Contrary to my expectations, there were no twinkle-eyed old Yankee types gathered round a checkerboard puffing corncob pipes, and I looked in vain for bearded Jewish patriarchs immersed in games of chess. No one even had a book. Most of those in the room that day were simply propped up in the lounge chairs like a row of dolls, staring straight ahead as if watching a playback of their lives. My grandfather wasn't among them.

If I sound less than reverent toward my elders, there's a good reason: I am. No doubt I'll be joining their ranks some day myself (unless I'm already food for worms, knocked down by an addict or a bus), and I'll probably spend my time blinking and daydreaming like everyone else. Meanwhile, though, I find it hard to summon up the respect one's supposed to feel for age. Old people have always struck me as rather childish, in fact. Despite their reputation, they've never seemed particularly wise.

Perhaps I just tend to look for wisdom in the wrong places. I remember a faculty party where I introduced myself to a celebrated visiting theologian and asked him a lot of earnest questions, only to discover that he was more interested in making passes at me. I once eavesdropped on the conversation of two well-known writers on the occult who turned out to be engaged in a passionate argument over whether a Thunderbird got better mileage than a Porsche. I bought the book by Dr. Kubler-Ross, the one in which she interviews patients with terminal cancer, and I found, sadly, that the dying have no more insight into life, or death, than the rest of us. But old people have been the biggest disappointment of all; I've yet to hear a one of them say anything profound. They're like that ninety-two-year-old Oxford don who, when asked by some deferential young man what wisdom he had to impart after nearly a century of living, ruminated a moment and then said something like, "Always check your footnotes." I've never found the old to

be wiser than anyone else. They've never told me anything I didn't know already.

But Father Pistachio… Well, maybe he was different. Maybe he was onto something after all.

At first, though, he seemed no more than an agreeable old humbug. I met him on June 8, when I went to visit Grandfather. It was the spring of '77, with the semester just ending; I had Wednesday afternoons free, and had told Grandfather to expect me. We had installed him in Park West the previous weekend, after collecting some things from his Brooklyn apartment and disposing of the rest. At one-thirty today, unable to find him in his bedroom on the ninth floor, I'd tried the TV lounge and the game room, both in vain, and had finally gone downstairs to ask Miss Pascua, a little Filipino woman who worked as the administrative secretary.

"Mr. Lauterbach likes to spend his time outdoors," she said, a hint of disapproval in her voice. "We let them do what they want here, you know. We don't like to interfere."

"I understand."

"He's doing very well, though," she went on. "He's already made a lot of friends. We're very fond of him."

"Glad to hear it. Any idea where he might be?"

"Well, he seems to have hit it off with some of the local people. They sit out there and talk all day." For a moment I pictured him in dignified conversation with some cronies on a sunny Broadway bench, but then she added: "I'd try looking for him one block down, on the other side of Amsterdam. He's usually on a stoop out there, sitting with a bunch of Puerto Ricans."

I walked out frowning. I should have known he'd do something like that. When you gave him a choice between the jungle to the east—with its fire escapes, its alleyways, its rat-infested basements—and the tamer pastures of Broadway, Broadway didn't have a chance.

The spot he'd picked was a particularly disagreeable one. It was just up the block from an evil-looking bar called Davey's (since closed down by the police), a little bit of Harlem on the West Side: the sort of place where you expect a shoot-out every Saturday night. The buildings beside it were ancient with grime; even the bricks seemed moist, and the concrete foundations were riddled with something curiously like wormholes. I passed a doorway full of teenaged boys who should have been in school. They were hunched furtively against the wall, lighting something out of sight, while others shot craps on the sidewalk, striking poses out of Damon Runyon. In the dim light of an open first-floor window, heavy shapes moved back and forth. A man in dark glasses hurried toward me, angrily dragging a child by the arm. The child said something—he couldn't have been more than five—and as the man passed by he scowled and muttered back, "Don't tell me 'bout your mother, your mother's a goddamn whore!" Already I was beginning to feel depressed. I was glad Karen hadn't come.

My grandfather was three stoops in from the corner, seated beside a large black woman easily twice his weight. On the railing to his right, perched above his shoulder like a raven, sat another old man, with skin like aged parchment and a halo of white hair. He was dressed in black trousers and a black short-sleeved shirt, with the white square of a priest's collar peeking out above it like a window. His mouth was half concealed behind a shaggy white moustache, and the sole incongruous touch was the unnatural redness of his lips, almost as if he were wearing lipstick. On his lap lay a white paper bag.

Grandfather smiled when he saw me, and got to his feet. "Where's that pretty wife of yours?" he asked. I reminded him that Karen was at work. He looked puzzled. "What, today?"

"It's Wednesday, remember?"

"My God, you're right!" He broke into astonished laughter. "It felt just like a Sunday!"

I alluded to the trouble I'd had finding him. Here he was, hiding in the shadows, when only one block over—east to the museum, west to Broadway—there were plenty of comfortable benches in the sun.

“Benches are for women,” he replied, with a conviction that allowed of no argument—just as, in some long-vanished luncheonette of my childhood, he’d told me, “Straws are for girls.” (What does it say about him that he believed this? And what does it say about me that since that time I’ve never used a straw?)

“Besides,” he said, “I wanted you to meet my friends. We get together here because the Father lives upstairs.” He nodded toward the old man, but introduced the woman to me first. Her name was Coralette. She was one of those wide, imperturbable creatures who take up two seats or more on the subway. It was impossible to guess her age, but I could hear, each time she spoke, the echoes of a girlhood in the South.

The man was introduced as “Father Pistachio.” This was not his name, but it was close enough. My grandfather never got his names or facts exactly right. Perhaps this had something to do with his general rebelliousness. It was certainly not a product of his age, for it had existed as long as I’d known him; half the time, in fact, he confused me with my father. Yet the names he thought up for most people were insidiously appropriate, and often stuck. Father Pistachio was one; I never saw the man without a white paper bag in his hand or, as it was now, crumpled in his lap—a bag that had been filled with those obscene-looking little red nuts, whose dye so stained his lips that he might have passed for some inhabitant of Transylvania.

But he wasn’t Transylvanian; nor was he, despite my grandfather’s introduction, a Puerto Rican. “No, no,” he said quickly, looking somewhat pained, “you no understand, my friend, I say Costa Rica my home. Paraiso, Costa Rica. City of Paradise.”

My grandfather shrugged. “So if it was paradise, what are you doing up here with an alter kocker like me?”

Coralette seemed to find this irresistibly funny, though I suspect the Yiddish escaped her. Pistachio smiled, too.

“My dear Herman,” he said, “one is not permitted to stay forever in Eden.” He winked at me, and added: “Besides, Paraiso just a name. Paradise here, in front of your face.”

I nodded dutifully, but could not help noticing the darkened corridor behind him, the graffiti on the crumbling bricks and, just above his head, a filthy window box from which a dead brown ivy plant and two long snakelike tendrils drooped. I wished he'd picked a more convincing spot.

But he was already quoting the authorities for support. "Buddha, he say, 'Every day is a good day.' Jesus Christ say, 'El Reino del Padre—the Kingdom of the Father—is spread upon the earth, but men are blind and do not see it."

"Yeah, where he say that?" asked Coralette. "Ain't in no Bible I ever read."

"Is in the one I read," said Pistachio. "The Gospel According to Thomas."

My grandfather chuckled and shook his head. "Thomas," he said, "always this Thomas! That's all you ever talk about."

I knew that Bible talk had always bored my grandfather to tears—he'd said so more than once—but this rudeness seemed uncharacteristic of him, especially to a man he'd known so short a time. Seating myself against the opposite railing, facing the old priest, I searched my mind for more congenial subjects. I forget exactly what we talked of first—the unseasonably warm weather, perhaps—but I do recall that twice again there were references to some private dispute between the two of them.

The first time, I believe, we'd been talking of the news—of the start of Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee, in fact, which my wife and I had watched on TV the night before. Coralette appeared uninterested in the story, but it brought a curious response from Father Pistachio—"I could tell you of another queen"—and an immediate dismissal from my grandfather: "Oh, stop already with your queen!" The second time came much later, and only after the conversation had taken a number of circuitous turns, but once again the starting point was an item from the previous night's news: in this case the repeal of Miami's gay rights ordinance ("Faygelehs," my grandfather snapped, "they oughta send 'em back where they came from!"), which had led to a discussion of Florida in general. Pistachio expressed an interest in settling there eventually—somehow he was under the impression that more than half its citizens spoke Spanish—but my grandfather had had

a grudge against the place ever since, during the ’20s, he’d made the mistake of investing in some real estate “just off the Everglades” and had lost his shirt. “Hell,” he fumed, “they were selling land down there that was still underground!”

I let that one go by me; I could never have touched it. But it did bring a kind of response: Coralette, who read the Enquirer each week as religiously as she read the Bible, reported that a colony of derelicts had been discovered living “unnergroun”’ in the catacombs below Grand Central Station. (Six months later the story would resurface in the Times.) There were as many as forty of these derelicts, pale, frightened, and skinny, subsisting on garbage and handouts from people in the street but spending most of their time down below, amid the steam pipes and the darkness. “Now some folks be wantin’ the city to clear ’em outa there,” she said, “but it don’t make no difference to me. Fact is, I feels kinda sorry for ’em. They just a bunch o’ poor, homeless men.”

Pistachio sighed, stirred once again by some private memory. “All men are homeless,” he said. “We have journeyed for so many year that—”

“Enough with the journey!” said my grandfather. “Can’t we ever talk about anything else?”

Hoping to forestall an argument, I tried to change the subject yet again. I had noticed a fat little paperback protruding from Pistachio’s back pocket, with Diccionario printed at the top. “I see you like to come prepared,” I said, pointing to the title.

He gave a shrug both courtly and ambiguous, in true Old World style. “Is for my book,” he said. His voice was modest, but there’d been a hint of capitals in it: “My Book.”

“You’re writing something?” I asked.

He smiled. “Is already written. More than forty years ago I finish it. Then I write it over in Latin, then in portugués. Now I am retired, write in English.”

So that was why he'd come up north—to work on a translation of his book. It had already been published (at his own expense, he admitted) in Costa Rica and Brazil. The English title, itself the work of almost three days, was to be "A New and Universal Commentary on the Gospel According to Thomas, Revised in Light of Certain Excavations."

"I write it just before I leave the Order," he explained. "It say all I ever want to say. If I live long enough, si Dios quiere, I pray that I may see my book in the seven major languages of the world."

This struck me as a shade optimistic, but I didn't want to risk insulting him. He was obviously an extreme case of the proverbial one-book author.

"Who knows," he added, with a nod to my grandfather, "maybe we even do the book in Yiddish."

Grandfather raised his eyebrows and pointedly looked away. I could see that he had heard all this before.

"I gather that it's some sort of religious tract," I said, trying to sound interested. "The Puritans used to go in for that sort of thing. Treatises on doctrine, damnation, the Nativity—"

He shrugged. "Is about a natividad, but not the one you think. Is about natividad of man."

"Ain't no big mystery in that," said Coralette. "Ain't none of us so different from the monkeys and the lizards and the worms. Lawd done made us outs earth, just like the Bible say. Made each and ever' one of us the same." Reaching back, she took Father Pistachio's dictionary and worked a finger back and forth against the glossy surface of its cover. Soon a little roll of dirt and rubbed-off skin, grey-black in color, had accumulated beneath it; whereupon, taking my own hand between her two much broader ones, she rubbed my fingertip against the same surface. The same material appeared, the same color.

"See?" she said triumphantly. "We's all of us God's clay."

I never got to ask Father Pistachio his own views on the subject because by this time three o'clock had passed and the older children of the neighborhood, released from Brandeis High, were accumulating on the sidewalk before us like Coralette's grey-black matter. My grandfather got unsteadily to his feet just as a trio of teenaged girls swept up the steps, followed by a boy with a pirate's bandana and the straggly beginnings of a moustache. Not one of them was carrying a schoolbook. For a moment Coralette remained where she'd been sitting, blocking half the entranceway, but then she, too, sighed heavily and made as if to stand. I gathered that this was the usual hour for the group to break up.

"I say farewell for now," said Father Pistachio. "Is time for me to go upstairs to sleep. Tonight I work a little on my book." I helped him down from his perch, amazed at how small and fragile he seemed; his feet had barely been able to reach the landing.

"Come on," I said to Grandfather, "I'll walk you back." I told the others that I hoped to see them again. I half believe I meant it.

My grandfather appeared to be in a good mood as we headed up 81st. I, too, was feeling good, if only from relief that he'd adjusted so readily to his new situation. "This life seems to be agreeing with you," I said.

"Yeah, things are always easier when you got a few friends around. That colored girl is good as gold, and so's the Father. He may not speak good English, but I'm telling you, he's one smart cookie. I almost wonder what he sees in me."

I had to admit it seemed an unlikely friendship: a self-professed scholar—a man of the cloth—keeping company with someone, in Whittier's phrase, "innocent of books" and of religion, the one equipped with little English, the other with no Spanish at all. What queer conversations those two old-timers must have had!

"You'll have to come by more often," Grandfather was saying. "I could tell he took to you right away. And he's dying to meet Karen."

"Oh? Why's that?"

“I don’t know, he said she sounded interesting.”

“That’s funny, I wonder why he’d…” I paused; I had had a sudden suspicion. “Hey, did you by any chance happen to mention where she works?”

“Sure. She’s with that big publishing outfit, isn’t she? Something to do with books.”

“That’s right. Account books! She’s in the billing department, remember?”

He shrugged. “Books are books.”

“I suppose so,” I said, and let the matter drop. Inside, though, I was wincing. Poor old Pistachio! No wonder he’d taken such an interest in us: the old geezer probably thought we’d help him sell his book! The truth was, of course, that using Karen as an “in” to the publishing world was like trying to break into Hollywood by dating an usher; but I saw no reason to tell this to Pistachio. He would find out soon enough. Meanwhile, he’d be a good friend for my grandfather.

“’Course, he does go on a bit about that book of his,” Grandfather was saying. “He’ll talk your ear off if you let him. Some of the theories he’s got…” He shook his head and laughed. “Know what he told me? That the Indians are a long-lost tribe of Israel!”

I was disappointed; I had heard that one too many times before. It had become something of a joke, in fact, like the Hollow Earth theory and Bigfoot. I didn’t mind Pistachio’s having a few crackpot notions—at his age he was entitled to believe what he pleased—but couldn’t he have been just a bit more original? The long-lost-tribe routine was old hat. Even my grandfather seemed to regard it as a joke.

But typically, he’d gotten it all wrong.

Saturday, June 11

“Is no one safe today,” said Father Pistachio. It was a statement, not a question. “Is the same even for an old man like me. Two nights ago I am followed home by six, seven boys. Maybe, in the dark, they do not see I wear the collar of a priest. I think they are getting ready to push me down, but I am lucky. God, He watches. Just as I am asking myself if it is wise to call for help, a car of the police comes slowly up the street, and when I turn around the boys are gone.”

“Po-lice?” sniffed Coralette. “I don’t have no use for them po-lice. Kids ain’t scared o’them no more, and the law don’t mean a thing. Station’s sittin’ right up there in the middle of 82nd Street, just a block away, and you ever see the house right next door to it? Hmmph! Wouldn’t want no daughter o’ mine livin’ there—not these days. Blocks ’round here ain’t fit for walkin’ down.”

“Aw, come on,” said my grandfather, “that’s no way to talk. Brooklyn’s ten times worse than this, believe me. The way I see it, if you’re gonna sit inside all day you may as well be dead.”

At this moment we, too, were sitting inside, round a greasy little table at Irv’s Snack Bar near the corner of 81st and Amsterdam, sipping our afternoon coffee and talking crime, New York’s favorite subject. Irv and his wife would let the old folks sit for hours, so Grandfather’s friends came here often, especially on weekends, when the stoop of Pistachio’s building was occupied by teenagers. Occasionally the blare of their radios penetrated the snack bar’s thin walls, along with the pounding rhythms of soul music from the jukebox inside Davey’s, just across the street. Saturday nights began early around here, at least when the weather was warm; even at noontime the noise was almost incessant, and continued through the weekend. I don’t know how anyone could stand it.

“My cousin’s step-sister up on 97th, she say things just as bad up there. Say they’s a prowler in the neighborhood.” The metal chair sagged noticeably as Coralette shifted her weight. “Some kinda pervert, she say. Lady downstairs from her—Mrs. Jackson, down in 1-B—she hear her little girl just a cryin’ out the other night, and see the light go on. Real late it was, and the chile only seven years old. She get up and go into the chile’s room to see what happened. Window’s wide open to let in the breeze, but she ain’t worried,

’cause they’s bars across it, like you got to have when you’s on the groun’ floor. But that chile, she shakin’ fit to die. Say she wake up and they’s a boy standin’ right by her bed, just a lookin’ down at her and doin’ somethin’ evil to hisself. She give a holler and reach for the light, and he take off. Wiggle his-self right out the window, she say. Mrs. Jackson, she look, but she don’t see nothin’, and she think the chile be havin’ bad dreams, ’cause ain’t nobody slippery enough to get through them bars… But then she look at the wall above the window, and they’s some kinda picture drew up there, higher than the little girl could reach. So Mrs. Jackson know that what the chile say is true. Chile say she seen that boy standin’ there, even in the dark. Say it was a white boy, that’s what she say, and mother-naked, too, ’cept for somethin’ he had on over his head, some-thin’ real ugly like. I tell you, from now on that chile gwin’ be sleepin’ wid the light on!”

“You mean to say steel bars aren’t enough these days?” I laughed, but I’m not sure why; we, too, lived on the ground floor, and not so far from there. “That’s all Karen has to hear. She’ll be after me again about moving to a more expensive place.” I turned to Grandfather. “Do me a favor, don’t mention this to her, okay?”

“Of course,” he said. “You don’t want to go around scaring women.”

Father Pistachio cleared his throat. “I would like very much to meet this Karen someday...”

“No question about it,” I assured him. “We’re going to get the two of you together real soon. Not today, though. Today she’s busy painting.”

My grandfather squinted at his watch, a souvenir of his years with the watch-casing firm. “Uh oh, speak of the devil, I have to get back. She’s probably up there already.”

My wife had gotten permission to repaint part of Grandfather’s bedroom wall, as well as a few pieces of furniture salvaged from his former apartment. She was convinced she did such things better without my help, and that I would only get in the way—a belief which I’d encouraged, as I was in no hurry to join the two of them. I much preferred to sit here in the snack bar, eating jelly doughnuts and tracing patterns in the sugar on the

table. Besides, there were some questions I wanted to ask Father Pistachio. Later, Karen and I were taking Grandfather out to eat, to celebrate his first successful week at the Manor. He'd told us it would be a welcome change.

"I'm looking forward to a decent meal tonight," he was saying, as he got up from his chair. He placed an unsteady hand on my shoulder. "These grandchildren of mine really know how to treat an old man!"

Making his way to the counter, he insisted on paying for my doughnuts and coffee, as well as for the Sanka he'd been restricted to since his stroke. "And give me some quarters, will you, Irv?" he asked, laying another dollar down. "I gotta do some wash, spruce up my wardrobe. My grandchildren are taking me out tonight—someplace swanky." Suddenly a doubt arose; he looked back at me. "Hey, I'm not going to have to wear a tie, am I?"

I shook my head. "It's not going to be that swanky!"

"Good," he said. "Just the same, I think I'll wear the socks with the monograms on 'em, the ones your mother gave me. You never can tell who you may be sitting next to." He bid the three of us good-bye, nodded to the counterman—"Take care, Irv, say hello to Mrs. Snackbaum for me"—and shuffled out the door.

Irv scratched his head. "I keep tellin' him, my name's Shapiro!"

Across the street the music had grown louder. I could feel the throb of the bass line through the soles of my shoes, and the air rang with grunting and screeching. I was glad I'd stayed inside.

Until now I'd avoided bringing up Pistachio's book. With Grandfather gone it was easier. "I understand," I said, "that you have some rather novel theories about the Indians and the Jews."

His face wrinkled into a grin. "Indian, Jew, Chinese, Turk—is all come from the same place."

"Yes, I remember. You said that's what you deal with in your 'Commentary.'"

“Exactamente. Is all there in the Gospel, for those who understand. Thomas, he is very clear, tell you all you want to know. Is through him I discover where man come from.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. Where does he come from?”

“Costa Rica.”

The grin remained, but the eyes were absolutely earnest. I waited in vain for a punchline. Beside him Coralette nodded sagely, as if she’d heard all this before and was convinced that it was true.

“That sounds just a little unlikely,” I said at last. “Man first walked erect somewhere in East Africa, at least that’s what I’ve always read. They’ve got it all mapped out. Asia and Europe were next, and then across the Bering Strait and down into America. That was where the Indians came from: they kept on spreading southward till they’d covered the New World.”

Pistachio had been listening patiently, mumbling “Yes… yes…” to himself as he searched his pockets for nuts. Finding one, he split it apart and studied it with the quiet satisfaction of a man contemplating a good cigar. At last he looked up. “Yes,” he said, “all this I too have heard, from the time I am estudiante. But is all wrong. Is—how you say?—backward. Truth, she is far more strange.”

The old man had gotten a faraway look in his eyes. Coralette pushed heavily to her feet and, mumbling excuses, waddled off upon some errand. I could see that it was lecture-time.

For the next half hour or so, as I sipped at still another cup of coffee, while the music from across the street grew steadily more primitive and the afternoon sunlight crept by inches up the wall, Pistachio gave me a short course in human history. It was an idiosyncratic one, to say the least, based as it was on certain Indian myth patterns and a highly selective reading of some fossil remains. According to his theory, the first men had evolved in the warm volcanic uplands of Central America, somewhere in the vicinity of Paraiso, Costa Rica—which was, by sheer coincidence, his own home town. For eons they had dwelled there in a city now gone but for the

legends, one great happy tribe beneath a wise and all-powerful queen. Then, hundreds of millennia ago, threatened by invaders from the surrounding jungle—apparently some rival tribe, though I found his account here confusing—they had suddenly abandoned their city and fled northward. What's more, they hadn't paused for rest; as if still in the grip of some feverish need to escape, the tribe had kept on moving, streaming up through the Nicaraguan rain forests, spreading eastward as the land widened before them, but also pressing northward, ever northward, through what was now the United States, Canada, and Alaska, until the more adventurous pushed past the edge of the continent, crossing into Asia and beyond.

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I listened to all this in silence, trying to decide just how seriously to take it. The whole thing sounded quite implausible to me, an old man's harmless fantasy, yet like a Velikovsky or a Von Däniken he was able to buttress his argument with a wide array of figures, facts, and names—names such as the Ameghino brothers, a pair of prominent nineteenth-century archaeologists who'd advanced a theory similar to his, but with their own home, Argentina, as the birthplace of mankind. I looked them up the next day in the school library and discovered that they'd actually existed, though their theories had reportedly been "held in disrepute" since the late 1880s.

The name that came up most often, however, was that of Saint Thomas himself. I looked him up as well. His "Gospel" isn't found in standard Bibles, but it's featured in the ancient Gnostic version (an English translation of which, published here in 1959, is on the desk beside me as I write). I should add, by way of a footnote, that Thomas has a special link with America: when the Spaniards first arrived on these shores in the sixteenth century they were shocked to find the Aztecs and other tribes practicing something that looked rather like Christianity, complete with hellfire, resurrections, virgin births, and magic crosses. Rather than admit that their own faith was far from unique, they theorized that Saint Thomas must have journeyed to the New World fifteen hundred years before, and that the Indians were merely practicing a debased form of the religion he had preached.

Somehow Pistachio had managed to scrape together all these queer old theories, folk tales, and fancies into a full-blown explanation of the human race—or at least that's what he claimed. He assured me that none of it conflicted with present-day Catholic doctrine, but then, I doubt he cared a fig for Catholic doctrine; he was obviously no normal priest. It was clear that, like a certain James character, he had "followed strange paths and worshipped strange gods." I wish now that I'd asked him what order he was from. I wonder if he left it voluntarily.

Yet at the time, despite my skepticism, I found the old man's sincerity persuasive. Moved by his description of the vast antediluvian city, with its pyramids, towers, and domes, and carried along by the sound of his voice as he traced man's hasty march across the planet, I could almost picture the course of events as if it were a series of tableaux. It had, I must admit, a certain grandeur: the idyllic tropical beginnings, a civilization sleeping through the centuries of peace, and then, all at once, the panicky flight from an army of invaders and the sudden dramatic surge northward—the first step in a global migration which would see that great primitive tribe break up, branching into other tribes that spread throughout the continent, wave upon wave, to become the Mochicans, the Chibchas, and the Changos, the Paniquitas, Yuncas, and Quechuas, the Aymaras and Atacamenos, the Puquinas and Paezes, the Coconucas, Barbacoas, and Antioquias, the Nicaraguan Zambos and Mosquitos, the Chontals of Honduras, the Maya and the Trahumare of Guatemala and Mexico, the Pueblo and the Navaho, the Paiute and the Crow, the Chinook and the Nootka and the Eskimo…

"Let me get one thing straight," I said. "You're telling me that this accounts for all the races of mankind? Even the Jews?"

He nodded. "They are just another tribe."

So Grandfather had gotten it backward. According to Pistachio, the Israelites were merely a long-lost tribe of Costa Rican Indians!

"But how about family records?" I persisted. "Train tickets, steam-ship passages, immigration forms? I know for a fact that my family came over here from Eastern Europe."

The old man smiled and patted me on the shoulder. “Then, my son, you have made a circle of the world. Welcome home!”

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The elevator shuddered to a halt and I stepped out onto the ninth floor. There was an odor of paint in the hall outside Grandfather’s door. I knocked, but no one answered. When there was no response the second time, I pushed my way inside. None of the residents’ doors were ever locked, old people being notoriously prone to heart attacks and fainting spells, strokes, broken hips, and other dislocations requiring immediate assistance. Though the supervision here was generally lax, absence from a meal without prior notice brought a visit from the staff. The previous summer, in a locked apartment in the middle of the Bronx, the body of an old man had lain alone and undiscovered for months until, riddled with maggots and swollen to four times its size, it had literally seeped through the floor and into the apartment below. That fate, at least, my grandfather would be spared.

His room, at the moment, was empty, but a radio whispered softly in the corner, tuned to some news station, and I saw my wife’s handiwork in the freshly painted nightstand and armoire. I was admiring the job she’d done on the molding round the window when the two of them walked in, looking somewhat out of sorts. I asked them what was the matter.

“It’s that laundry room,” said Karen. “Only three of the washers are working, and we had a few slowpokes ahead of us. And of course your gallant old grandfather insisted that some women behind us go first, and we ended up waiting till everybody else was done. We just got the clothes in the dryer five minutes ago.”

“Now, now,” said Grandfather, “it’ll just be a few minutes more, and then we can get this show on the road.” He turned up the radio, an ancient white plastic Motorola, and for the next half hour we listened to reports of Mrs. Carter’s South American tour, South Moluccan terrorists in Holland, and increasingly hot weather in New York. Soon he stretched and began fiddling sleepily with his pipe, which, as long as I’d known him, he’d never been able to keep lit. My wife saw some spots she’d missed beneath the window.

I picked up the laundry bag and headed down the hall, attempting to look useful. When the elevator arrived I pressed the lowest button, marked by a "B" as big as my thumb.

Minutes later, when the door slid open once again, I felt momentarily disoriented. Outside the world still lay in daylight; down here, now that the machines were not in use, the corridor was gloomy and silent. It reminded me of a hospital at midnight, tiled walls receding into the distance while, down the middle of the ceiling, a line of dim, caged safety-bulbs made spots of illumination separated by areas of shadow.

The door to the laundry room would normally have stood within the light, but the bulb just above it was missing, leaving that section of the hall somewhat darker than the rest. Opening the door, I reached inside and groped for the light switch while my face was bathed by waves of steamy air. The superintendent's office must have been just beyond the farther wall, because I could hear, very faintly, the drumbeat of some mambo music. Then the fluorescent lights winked on, one after the other, with a loud, insect-like buzzing, but beneath it I could still make out the beat.

I recognized the broken washer at once. It was the unit in the corner at the back, the one that had been out of order weeks ago. Its electrical wire, coiled beside it, had been messily severed near the end, while another length still dangled from the socket in the wall. Evidently Frito had already attempted some repairs, for the unit had been pushed out of line, nearly two feet toward the center of the room. Beneath it, now exposed to view, lay a wide, semicircular drainage hole that extended, from the look of it, hundreds of feet down to some place Coleridge might have dreamed of, where waters flowed in everlasting night. No doubt the machines emptied into an underground spring, or one of those rivers that are said to run beneath Manhattan; only last winter the Times had written up a Mercer Street man who fished through a hole in his basement, pulling up eyeless white eels from a subterranean stream.

Leaning over, I caught a whiff of sewage, and could see, very dimly, the swirl of blackish current down below. Within it, outlined against the overhead lights, floated the reflection of my own familiar face, distorted by the movement of the water. It brought back memories of my honeymoon at

a Catskill resort where, near the woods, an abandoned well lay covered by a moss-grown granite slab. When workmen lifted it aside my wife and I had peered into the hole, and for an instant had seen, there in the water, a pair of enormous frogs staring back at us, their pale bodies bloated like balloons. Suddenly they'd blinked, turned their bottoms up, and disappeared into the inky depths.

The dryer regarded me silently with its great cyclopean eye. The fluorescent lights buzzed louder. On the wall someone had scratched a crude five-pointed shape halfway between a holly leaf and a hand. I stuffed Grandfather's laundry into the bag and hurried from the room, happy to get out of there. Before closing the door, I switched the lights off. In the darkness, more clearly now, I heard the drumming. Where was Frito, anyway? He should have been spending less time on the mambo and more on the machines.

Grandfather appeared to be dozing when I got back to his room, but as soon as I stepped inside he looked up, seized the laundry bag, and dumped it on his bed. "Got to have my lucky socks!" he said, searching through a collection of the rattiest looking underwear I'd ever seen.

"Where's my skirt?" asked Karen, peering over his shoulder.

"You're wearing it," I said.

"No, I mean the one I had on first—that old summer thing I use for painting. It got filthy, so I stuck it in with Grandfather's stuff."

I knew the one she meant—a dowdy old green rag she'd had since college. "I must have left it in the dryer," I said, and walked wearily back down the hall. The elevator hadn't moved since I'd left it.

Yet someone had gotten to the laundry room ahead of me; I saw light streaming under the door, and heard the distant music and a stream of Spanish curses. Inside I found Frito, shoulders heaving as he strained to push the broken washer back against the wall. He looked very angry.

He turned when I came in, and nodded once in greeting. “You give me hand with this, yes? This thing, she weigh six hundred pound.”

“How’d you manage to move it out here in the first place?” I asked, eyeing the squat metal body. Six hundred seemed a conservative guess.

“Me?” he said. “I didn’t move it.” His eye narrowed. “Did you?”

“Of course not, I just thought—”

“Why I do this for, huh? Is no reason. Must have been los ninos. They do anything.”

I pointed to the severed wire. “And kids did that? Looks more like rats to me. I mean, look at it! It looks gnawed.”

“No,” he said, “I tell you once already, rats not gonna bother my machine. They try and eat through this stuff, they break their fuckin’ teeth. Same with the cement.” He stamped vehemently upon the floor; it sounded sturdy enough. “’Leven year I’m in this place, and never any trouble till a couple weeks ago. I want to buy a lock, but Calzone says—”

But my eye had just been caught by a blob of faded green lying crumpled in the shadow of the dryer by the wall. It was Karen’s skirt. Leaving the superintendent to his fulminations, I went to pick it up. I grasped the edge of the cloth—and dropped it with a cry of disgust. The thing was soaking wet, and, as I now saw, it had been lying in a puddle of milky white fluid whose origin seemed all too apparent. About it hung the sour odor I’d smelled before.

“Ugh!” I said. I made a face. I wasn’t going to take this back upstairs. Let Karen believe it was lost. Gingerly I prodded it across the floor with my foot and kicked it down the drainage hole. It flashed green for a moment, spreading as it fell, and then was lost from sight in the blackness. I thought I saw the oily waters stir.

Frito shook his head. “Los ninos,” he said. “They getting in here.”

My eye followed the glistening trail that led from the dryer to the hole. “That’s not kids,” I said. “That’s a grown man living in the building. Come on, let’s get this covered up before somebody falls through.” Bracing myself, I put my shoulder to the machine and pushed. Even when the superintendent joined me it was difficult to budge; it felt like it was bolted to the floor. At last, as metal scraped on concrete with an ugly grating sound, we got the thing back into line.

Just before leaving the room, I looked back to see Frito crouched by the coils of electric cord, glumly poking at the strands of wire that twisted like claws from the end. I sensed that there was something missing, but couldn’t decide what it was. With a final wave I stepped into the hall, my mind already on dinner. Behind me, aside from the buzzing of the lights, the place was absolutely silent.

Wednesday, June 15

My grandfather was long overdue for a haircut; he’d last had one in April, well before his stroke, and his hair was beginning to creep over the back of his collar, giving him the appearance of an aged poet or, as he maintained, “an old bum.” I’d have thought that he’d be pleased to get it trimmed, and to idle away an afternoon at the barber’s, but when I arrived to pick him up in the lobby of the Manor he looked weary and morose.

“Everything’s slowing down,” he said. “I guess I must be feeling my age. I looked at my face in the mirror when I got up this morning, and it was the face of an old man.” He ran his fingers through his hair, which had long ago receded past the top of his head. “Even my hair’s slowing down,” he said. “Damned stuff doesn’t grow half as fast as it used to. I remember how my first wife—your grandmother—used to say I looked distinguished because my hair was prematurely grey.” He shook his head. “Well, it’s still grey, what’s left of it, but it sure as hell ain’t premature.”

Maybe he was depressed because, after a lifetime of near-perfect health, he’d finally encountered something he couldn’t shake off; though the doctor considered him recovered, the stroke had left him weak, uncoordinated, and increasingly impatient with himself. Or maybe it was just the weather. It was one of those heavy, overcast spring days that threaten rain before

nightfall and, in the coming weeks, a deadly summer. As we strolled outside the air was humid, the sky as dark as slate. Beneath it earthly objects—the tropical plants for sale outside a florist's shop, an infant in red shorts and halter with her ears already pierced, the gaudy yellow signboard of La Concha Superette—stood out with unnatural clarity, as if imbued with a terrible significance.

"My legs feel like they're ready for the junk heap," said Grandfather. "My mind'll probably go next, and then where will I be?"

He was, in fact, walking even more slowly than usual—he'd stumbled on the planks across the sewage ditch, and I'd had to shorten my steps in order to stay by his side—but I assured him that he had a few good decades left. "If worst comes to worst," I said, "you've still got your looks."

This brought a snort of derision, but I noticed that he stood a little straighter. Screwing up his face, he thrust his hands into his pockets like some actor in a 1930s Warner Brothers' movie. "Nobody wants a man with a mug like mine," he said, "except maybe somebody like Mrs. Rosenzweig."

"Well, there you are." I remembered the little old woman with the deaf roommate. "See? There's someone for everyone." He shook his head and muttered something about it's not being right. "Not right?" I said. "What's the matter? Saving yourself for some pretty little blonde?"

He laughed. "There aren't any blondes where I live. They're all old and grey like me."

"So we'll get you someone from the neighborhood."

"Stop already with the dreaming! The closest thing you'll find around here is some colored girl with dyed blonde hair."

"Here's one that looks white enough," I said, tapping on the glass. We had reached the Barberia/Barbershop, where an advertising placard in the window, faded by the sun, showed a beefy Mark Spitz look-alike, hair aglisten with Vitalis, attempting to guess the identity of a sinuous young

woman who had just crept up behind him. Covering his eyes with two pale, finely manicured hands, she was whispering, “Guess who?” That unwarranted question mark annoyed me.

The shop’s front door was open to let in a nonexistent breeze, and the smell of rose water, hair tonic, and sweat hung nostalgically in the doorway. There was only one barber inside, fluttering over a burly latino who sat glowering into the mirror, somehow retaining his dignity despite the clumps of shiny black hair that covered his shoulders like fur. Portraits of Kennedy, Pope John, and some unidentified salsa king beamed down at us through a talcum-powder haze. Seating himself by the magazine rack, my grandfather reached instinctively for the Daily News, realized he’d already seen it, and passed it on to me. Bored, I scanned the headlines—Spain holding its first free elections in forty-one years, two derelicts found dead and blinded in a men’s room at Grand Central Station, James Earl Ray returned to prison following an escape —while Grandfather stared doubtfully at a pile of Spanish-language magazines on the lower shelf. Moments later I saw him frown, lean forward, and extract from beneath the pile a tattered, thumb-stained Hustler, which he opened near the middle. His expression changed, more in shock than delight. “Mmmph,” he said, “they never had stuff like this back in Brooklyn.” Suddenly remembering himself, he shut the magazine. I could see he was embarrassed. “You know,” he said, “it’s silly for you to sit around here all afternoon. I’ll be okay on my own.”

“Fine,” I said. “We can meet later for coffee.” Karen wouldn’t be home till after her Wednesday-evening class, and I had plenty of errands to do.

Outside, the sky had grown even darker. As I started up Amsterdam, I could see shopkeepers rolling up their awnings. Davey’s Tavern, on the corner ahead, was already noisy with patrons, while soul music, drunks, and broken beer bottles spilled out upon the pavement in front. An overturned garbage can disgorged its contents into the gutter; a few feet past it the opening to a sewer was clogged with bread crusts, wormy lettuce leaves, and pools of curdled cream. “Peewee, huh?” a man on the sidewalk was shouting. He wore greasy overalls and a sleeveless T-shirt dark with perspiration. “Hey, nigger, why they callin’ you Peewee for? You needs some o’ what I got?” He began digging drunkenly at his fly while the small,

goateed man he'd been shouting at hurried toward a nearby car, muttering threats to "get me somethin' an' bust that nigger's ass."

I was just crossing the street to avoid the inevitable fight when I heard my name called. It was Father Pistachio, lounging calmly on his stoop just around the corner from the scene of action and grinning at me beneath his halo of white hair. In truth I'd been hoping to avoid him as well: I just didn't have the time today for another history lesson. Resolving that our meeting would be brief, I waved and circled warily in his direction. He seemed to be alone.

"Where's your friend?" I asked, declining his invitation to sit down.

"Coralette? She call me up this morning, all dolorosa, tell me she have trouble in the building where she live. Something about Last Rites. I tell her I am a priest, I can give the Last Rites, but she say is all right, she going to be asking her minister. Then someone else is having to use the telephone—Coralette, you know, she live in a hotel, is not a nice place at all—and so there is no more time for talking. She tell me she will come by later, though. Maybe you will still be here."

"I doubt it," I said. "I really can't stay. I've got to join my grandfather in a little while."

"Ah, yes." The old man smiled. "Herman, he say he gain twenty pound Saturday night at the restaurant. Say he have the best time of his life. And I am thinking to myself, Is good to know that some young people today still have respect for the old."

I nodded uneasily, hoping he wasn't leading up to another request to meet Karen. I hated to keep putting him off.

"Maybe soon you and your wife will be my guests for dinner," he went on. "Real Costa Rican food. How you like that?"

I sighed and said I'd like it very much.

“Good, good.” He was visibly pleased. “I am just upstairs. And after I make the dinner, I show you what is to be in my book. Charts, maps, pictures—you understand? Las ilustraciones. Some I have already in the first edition, published in Paraiso. I bring it for you next time, yes?”

I said that would be fine.

All this time we had been hearing music from around the corner. Now, suddenly, came the sounds of a scuffle: a taunt, a scream, sporadic bursts of laughter from the crowd.

Pistachio shook his head. “Is a shame. Men, they just want to fight.”

“Some men,” I said. “But our great-great-granddaddies don’t seem to have gone in for it much, at least according to you. They sound pretty cowardly, in fact—pulling up stakes when another tribe showed up, running off like a bunch of kids, leaving the city behind… Sounds to me like they gave up without a fight.”

I suppose I was needling him a bit, but it didn’t seem to faze him.

“I think you do not understand,” he said. “I never say it is another tribe. Is another raza, maybe, another people. One cannot be sure. No one knows where they are from. No one knows their name. Maybe they are what God make before He make a man. Legend say that they are soft, like God’s first clay, but that they love to fight. Quick like the piranha, and impossible to kill. No use to hit them in the head.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“Is hard to say. Many different stories. In one the Chibcha tell, is because they have something on the face. Flat places, ridges, things like little hooks. Back of head, she is like the front; all look much the same. Me, I think this mean they wear a special thing to cover the head in war.” He made a kind of helmet with his hands. “See? This way you cannot hurt them, cannot keep them out. They go where they want, take what they want. Break into the city, steal the food, carry many captives to their king. The lucky ones they kill.”

“They don’t sound like very nice people.”

He gave a short, unmerry laugh. “Some Indians say that they are devils. Chibcha say they are the children of God, but children He make wrong. Is no pity inside them, no love for God or man. When God see that they will not change, He try to get rid of them. They are so strong He have to try one, two, three times! Chibcha call them Xo Tl’mi-go, ‘The Thrice Accursed.’”

I’m quoting here from memory and my spelling is approximate at best; whatever it was that he actually said, it was unpronounceable. My eyes were held by his plump little red-stained lips, which worked up and down when he talked and which continued to do so even now, as he paused to stuff another nut between them. The fight-sounds down the block had momentarily subsided, but then I heard the jangle of breaking glass—for me, even at a distance, the most unnerving and ugly of sounds—and I realized that the battle was still very much in progress. I’d swear that at one point I could hear the echoes of a faraway war cry; but maybe it was just the effect of the story.

The story—an Indian legend, he claimed—seemed to have been cooked up by a committee of primitive tribesmen sitting round a fire trying to scare themselves. It told of the invaders—clearly a bad bunch, given to all manner of atrocities—and of God’s repeated attempts to exterminate them.

“First, they say, God curse the women, make them all estériles, barren. But is no good; is not enough. The men, they leave the jungle, raid the city, carry off its women from their bed. As long as they find women, they are still breeding.”

“So then God curses the men, right?”

“Exactamente!” Raising a finger dramatically, he leaned toward me and lowered his voice, though there was no one else around. “God, He make their penes drop off. Their manhood. But again it is no good. Even this is not enough. The fighting, the raiding, she goes on as before. The women, they are taken from the city and—” Here a disapproving little clucking sound, “—just as before.”

“But how could they keep on breeding without their, uh…”

He gave another one of those all-purpose Latin shrugs, which seemed terribly enigmatic but may just have been embarrassed. “Oh,” he said vaguely, “they find a way.” He picked a sliver of pistachio from his teeth and stared at it a moment. “But is hard to guess what is truth here, what is tabula. Is not history, you know. Is only a story the Indians tell. Un cuento de hadds.”

A fairy tale—yes, that’s exactly what it was. A prehistoric fairy tale.

“Well,” I said, “I guess you can’t blame our ancestors for running away. Those outsiders don’t sound like the kind of people you want to hang around with. What happened, they take over when the others moved out?”

The old man nodded. “City, she is theirs now. Belong to them. For sport they pull her down—every temple, every tower, every brick. Soon they are making ready to go after the others; is time to breed again, time to bring back food, women, captives for the sacrifice. And now, just before they leave, God make His final curse: He seal their eyes close, every one, forever. No more can they follow the tribe of our fathers. For them, is no more sunlight, no more day. One by one they crawl back to the jungle. One by one they are lost. All of them are dead now, dead and in the earth for two hundred thousand year. Paraiso, she is built upon the place where bodies lie. Farmers turn their bones up with the plow, grind them up for meal. All are cenizas now—dust and ashes.”

That certainly sounded final enough, I thought. Exeunt the villains. At least the fairy tale had a happy ending…

“But hold on,” I said, “what if these fellows survived even a third curse? I mean, the first two didn’t even slow them down, they adapted right away. And it’s not as if losing your sight were a sentence of death. Who’s to say the smart ones didn’t stick around? Their children could be down there in the jungle right this minute, trying to figure out where all the women went!”

“You think perhaps they are hoping to make a new raid on Paraiso?” The old priest smiled wanly. “No, my friend. The last of them die off down there

two hundred thousand year ago. Their story, she is over. Se termino." He clapped his hands. "Now the tribes of man, they are far more interesting. My book tells how they learn to read the stars, build ships, make fire…"

But I wasn't listening. I was thinking once again of those great Mayan cities, Tikal and Copan and the rest, standing silent and deserted in the middle of the jungle—as if, without warning, one afternoon or in the dead of night, all of their inhabitants had simply disappeared, or walked away, or fled.

I wasn't sure just where those cities lay, but I knew they were nowhere near Paraiso.

My grandfather sat waiting for me in the snack bar, lacquered and perfumed and shorn. "You shoulda seen the fight," he said as I settled into my chair. "Those colored boys can really take a beating. Damn thing would still be going on if it wasn't for the weather." He nodded toward the window, against which heavy drops of rain were splattering like gunfire.

For the next few minutes he regaled me with a description of the fight, which he'd viewed from the doorway of the barbershop. The shop itself had disappointed him—"four seventy-five," he said ruefully, "I could've cut my own hair for less than that!"—but its magazines had been a revelation. "It's unbelievable," he said, "they're showing everything nowadays. And you could see their faces!"

"What, are you kidding?" Maybe I hadn't heard right. "You mean to say you spent your time looking at the faces, instead of—"

"No, no, I didn't mean that! What the hell you take me for?" He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "What I'm saying is, you could tell who these gals were. You'd recognize 'em if you saw 'em on the street. In my day, if some floozie took her clothes off in a magazine, they made damn sure they blocked her eyes out first. Or maybe they'd show you the back of her head. But you hardly ever got to see the face."

I was going to ask him where he'd been living the past twenty years, but he was staring behind me and beginning to get up. I turned to see Coralette

squeezing through the door. She saw us and moved ponderously toward our table, shaking rain from her umbrella as she came. “Lawd,” she said, “if this ain’t just the worst day I ever see!” Heaving herself into a seat, she sighed and shook her head. “Trouble, jus’ no end o’ trouble.”

Coralette, it turned out, was a resident of the Notre Dame Hotel, which stood beside a drug rehabilitation center on West 80th Street. I had passed beneath its awning several times; it was a shabby little place, notable only for the grandiosity of its name and for a Coke machine that all but filled its lobby. Coralette’s room was on the second floor, by the rear landing. Across the hall lived a tall, ungainly young black girl, a former addict who’d been enrolled in one of the programs at the building next door. The girl was severely retarded, with impaired speech and a pronounced mongoloid cast to her features, yet according to the scandalized Coralette she spent most of her time with a succession of men—criminals and fellow addicts, to judge by their appearance —from the s.r.o. hotels uptown. Occasionally she would bring one of these men back with her; more often she was out all night, and would return home in the morning barely able to report where she had been.

This spring had seen a change in her. She had stopped going out, and had taken to spending the nights in her room, although it was several weeks before the older woman had realized it. “She been in there all the time,” said Coralette, “only I figured she away ’cause I don’t never see no light under the door. Then one night I’s on the way to the bathroom and hears her voice, but she ain’t sayin’ nothin’… At first I think maybe she sick, or cryin’ out in her sleep. But then I hears this movin’ around, and I know she got somebody in there with her. I hears the two of ’em again on my way back. They makin’ a lot o’ noise, but they ain’t talkin’, if you knows what I mean.”

The noise had been repeated on succeeding nights, and once Coralette had walked by when the visitor apparently was sleeping, “snorin’ fit to kill.” A few weeks later she had heard somebody coming up the stairs, followed by the closing of the door across the hall. “Now I ain’t nosy,” she declared, “but I did take me a peek through the keyhole when he pass. Didn’t see

much, ’cause the light out in the hall and it was dark as sin, but look to me like he didn’t have no trousers on.”

One night in April she’d encountered the girl outside the bathroom. “She lookin’ sorta sick—say she think she got some sorta worm in her—so I asks her to come on in and rest herself. I got me a hot plate, so I cooks up a can o’ black bean soup. Poor chile don’t even know enough to say thank you, but she drink it all right down. ’Fore she go I asks her how she feelin’, and she say she a whole lot better now. Say she think she gwin’ be my frien’. Cot herself a bran’ new boyfrien’, too. Sound like she real proud of herself.”

For the past two weeks no one had seen her, though from time to time Coralette had heard her moving about in the room. “Sound like she alone now,” Coralette recalled. “I figured she was finally settlin’ down, takin’ that treatment like she s’posed to. But then today the lady from the center come and say that girl ain’t showed up for a month.”

They had tried her door and found it locked. Knocking had brought no response; neither had an appeal from Coralette. Several other tenants had grown nervous. Finally the manager had been summoned; his passkey had opened the door.

The room, said Coralette, had been a shambles. “They was some kinda mess high up on the walls, and you got to hold your nose when you go in.” The girl had been found near the center of the room, hanging naked from the light fixture with a noose around her neck. Oddly, her feet had still been resting on the floor; she must have kept her legs drawn up while dying.

“I guess that boy of hers done left her all alone.” Coralette shook her head sorrowfully. “Seems a shame when you think of it, leavin’ her like that, ’specially ’cause I recollect how proud she been. Say he was the first white boyfrien’ she ever had.”

Wednesday, June 29

As one who believes that mornings are for sleeping, I’ve always tried, both as a student and a teacher, to schedule my classes for later in the day. The earliest I ever ride the subway is ten or ten-thirty a.m., with the executives,

the shoppers, and the drones. One morning just before my marriage, however, returning home from Karen's house downtown, I found myself on the subway at half-past seven. Immediately I knew that I was among a different class of people, virtually a different tribe; I could see it in their work clothes, in the absence of neckties, and in the brown bags and lunch pails that they carried in place of briefcases. But it took me several minutes to discern a more subtle difference: that, instead of the Times, the people around me were reading (and now and then moving their lips to) the Daily News.

This, as it happens, was my grandfather's favorite—nay, only—reading matter, aside from an occasional racing form. "You see the story on page nine?" he demanded, waving the paper in my face. On an afternoon as hot as this I was grateful for the breeze. We were seated like three wise men, he, Father Pistachio, and I, on the stoop of Pistachio's building. I had joined them only a moment before and was sweating from my walk. Somehow these old men didn't mind the heat as much as I did; I couldn't wait to get back to my air conditioner.

"Recognize this?" said my grandfather, pointing to a photo sandwiched between a paean to the threatened B-1 bomber and a profile of Menachem Begin. "See? Bet you won't find this in your fancy-shmancy Times!"

I squinted at the photo. It was dark and rather smudged, but I recognized the awning of the Notre Dame Hotel.

"Wow," I said, "we'll have to send this down to Coralette." Last week, totally without warning, she had packed her bags and gone to stay with a sister in South Carolina, crossing herself and mumbling about "white boys" who were smashing the lights in her hall. I'd had to get the details from Grandfather, as my wife and I had been upstate last week. I hadn't even had a chance to say good-bye.

"I don't know," said Grandfather, "I'm not so sure she'd want to read this."

The article—"Watery Grave for Infant Quints"—was little more than an extended caption. It spoke of the "five tiny bodies… shrunken and foul-smelling" that had been discovered in a flooded area of the hotel basement

by Con Ed men investigating a broken power line. All five had displayed the same evidence of "albinism and massive birth defects," giving the News the opportunity to refer to them as "the doomed quintuplets" and to speculate about the cause of death; "organic causes" seemed likely, but drowning and even strangulation had not been ruled out. "Owing to decomposition," the article noted, "it has not been possible to determine the infants' age at the time of death, nor whether they were male or female. Caseworkers in the Police Department's newly revamped Child Welfare Bureau say that despite recent budget cutbacks they are tracking down several leads."

"Pretty horrible," I said, handing the paper back to my grandfather. "I'm just glad Karen doesn't read things like this."

"But I have brought for you a thing she may like." Father Pistachio was holding up a slim orange book bound in some sort of shiny imitation cloth. It had one of those crude, British-type spines that stick out past the edges of the cover: obviously a foreign job, or else vanity press. This book, as it happened, was both. It was the Costa Rican edition of his "Commentary on Saint Thomas."

"Is a present," he said, placing it reverently in my hand. "For you, also for your wife. I inscribe it to you both."

On the flyleaf, in trembly, old-fashioned script, he had written, "To my dear American friends: With your help I will spread the truth to all readers of your country," and, beneath it, "'We wander blind as children through a cave; yet though the way be lost, we journey from the darkness to the light.' —Thomas xv:i."

I read it out loud to Karen after dinner that night while she was in the kitchen washing up. "Gee," she said, "he's really got his heart set on getting that thing published. Sounds to me like a bit of a fanatic."

"He's just old." I flipped through the pages searching for illustrations, since my Spanish was rusty and I didn't feel like struggling through the text. Two Aztecs with a cornstalk flashed past me, then drawings of an arrowhead, a woolly mammoth, and a thing that resembled a swim-fin. "El guante de un

usurpador," the latter's caption said. The glove of a usurper. It looked somehow familiar; maybe I'd seen one at the YMCA pool. I turned past it and came to a map. "See this?" I said, holding up the book. "A map of where your ancestors came from. Right on up through Nicaragua."

"Mmm."

"And here's a map of that long-lost city—"

"Looks like something out of Flash Gordon." She went back to the dishes.

"—and a cutaway view of the main temple."

She peered at it skeptically. "Honey, are you sure that old man's not putting you on? I'd swear that's nothing but a blueprint of the Pyramid at Giza. You can find it in any textbook, I've seen it dozens of times. He must have gotten hold of a Xerox machine and— Good God, what's that?"

She was pointing toward a small line drawing on the opposite page. I puzzled out the caption. "That's, um, let me see, 'La cabeza de un usurpador,' the head of a usurper… Oh, I know, it must be one of the helmets the invaders wore. A sort of battle mask, I guess."

"Really? Looks more like the head of a tapeworm. I'll bet he cribbed it from an old bio book."

"Oh, don't be silly. He wouldn't stoop to that." Frowning, I drifted back to the living room, still staring at the page. From the page the thing stared blankly back. She was right, I had to admit. It certainly didn't look like any helmet I'd ever seen: the alien proportions of the face, with great blank indentations where the eyes should be (unless those two tiny spots were meant for eyes), the round, puckered "mouth" area with rows of hooklike "teeth…"

Shutting the book, I strolled to the window and gazed out through the latticework of bars. Darkness had fallen on the street only half an hour before, yet already the world out there seemed totally transformed.

By day the neighborhood was pleasant enough; we had what was considered a "nice" building, fairly well maintained, and a "nice" block, at least our half of it. The sidewalk lay just outside our windows, level with the floor on which I stood. Living on the bottom meant a savings on the rent, and over the years I'd come to know the area rather well. I knew where the garbage cans were grouped like sentries at the curbside, and how the large brass knocker gleamed on the reconverted brownstone across the street. I knew which of the spindly little sidewalk trees had failed to bud this spring, and where a Mercedes was parked, and what the people looked like in the windows facing mine.

But it suddenly occurred to me, as I stood there watching the night, that a neighborhood can change in half an hour as assuredly as it can change in half a block. After dark it becomes a different place: another neighborhood entirely, coexisting with the first and separated by only a few minutes in time, the first a place where everything is known, the other a place of uncertainty, the first a place of safety, the other one of—

It was time to draw the curtains, but for some reason I hesitated. Instead, I reached over and switched off the noisy little air conditioner, which had been rattling metallically in the next window. As it ground into silence, the noise outside seemed to rise and fill the room. I could hear crickets, and traffic, and the throb of distant drums. Somewhere out there in the darkness they were snapping their fingers, bobbing their heads, maybe even dancing; yet, for all that, the sound struck me as curiously ominous. My eyes kept darting back and forth, from the shadows of the lampposts to the line of strange dark trees—and to that menacing stretch of unfamiliar sidewalk down which, at any moment, anything might walk on any errand.

Stepping back to adjust the curtains, I was startled by the movement of my own pale reflection in the glass, and I had a sudden vision, decidedly unscientific, no doubt inspired by that picture in the book: a vision of a band of huge white tapeworms, with bodies big as men, inching blindly northward toward New York.

Wednesday, July 6

"It was awful. Awful."

“You’re telling me! Musta been a real nightmare.”

I folded my paper and sat up in the chair, straining to hear above the hum of the fan. The lobby was momentarily deserted, except for an old man dozing in the corner and two old women leafing through a magazine; a third sat numbly by their side, as if waiting for a bus. In the mirror I could see Miss Pascua and Mr. Calzone talking in the office just behind me. They were keeping their voices low.

“You’ve heard the, uh, details?”

“Nope. Just what I read in yesterday’s News. Oh, sure, they’re all talking about it back in the kitchen. You know how the guys are. Most of ’em got interviewed by the police, and they think they’re on Kojak. But nobody knows much. I ain’t seen Mrs. Hirschfeld all week.”

“Her daughter came and took her Monday morning. I doubt if she’ll be coming back.”

I’d had the same impulse myself last night, when I’d first heard of the incident. I had telephoned my grandfather and asked him if he wanted to move out. He’d sounded angry and upset, but he’d expressed no desire to leave. The Manor, he’d decided, was as safe as anywhere else. A new guard had been hired for the entranceway, and tenants had been told to lock their doors.

“They haven’t finished with the room yet,” Miss Pascua was saying. “They keep marching through here with their bags and equipment and things. Plus we’ve got the Con Ed men downstairs. It’s a real mad-house.”

“And Mrs. Rosenzweig?”

“Ah, the poor thing’s still at Saint Luke’s. I was the one who telephoned the police. I heard the whole thing.”

“Yeah? Bad, huh?” He sounded eager.

“Absolutely awful. She said she was fast asleep, and then something woke her up. I guess it must’ve been pretty loud, because you know what a racket the air conditioner makes.”

“Well, don’t forget, she’s not the one who’s got problems there. Her hearing’s pretty sharp.”

“I guess it must be. She said she could hear somebody snoring. At first, though, she didn’t think anything of it. She figured it was just Mrs. Hirschfeld in the next room, so she tries to get back to sleep. But then she hears the snoring getting louder, and it seems to be coming closer. She calls out, ‘Elsie, is that you?’ I mean, she was confused, she didn’t know what was going on, she thought maybe Mrs. Hirschfeld was walking in her sleep. But the snoring doesn’t stop, it just keeps getting closer to the bed…”

Across the lobby the elevator door slid open with an echoing of metal; several old men and women emerged. I was about to stand, until I saw that Grandfather wasn’t among them. He had never been on time in his life.

“That’s when she starts getting scared—”

Miss Pascua leaned forward. Above the mantel to my left, the figures in the painting stood frozen gravely at attention, as if listening.

“—because all of a sudden she realizes that the sound’s coming from more than one place. It’s all around her now, like there are dozens of sleepwalkers in the room. She puts out her hand, and she feels a face right next to hers. And the mouth is open—her fingers slide all the way in. She said it was like sticking your hand inside a tin can: all wet and round, with little teeth around the edge.”

“Jesus.”

“And she couldn’t scream, because one of them got his hand over her face and held it there. She said it smelled like something you’d find in the gutter. God knows where he’d been or what he’d been doing...

My eyebrows rose skyward; I'm sure I must have started from my chair. If what Miss Pascua said was true, I knew exactly where the culprit had been and what he'd been doing. I almost turned around and called out to the two of them, but instead I remained silent. There'd be time enough to tell someone later; I would go to the authorities this very afternoon. I sat back, feeling well pleased with myself, and listened to Miss Pascua's voice grow more and more excited.

"I guess she must've thrashed around a lot, because somehow she got free and yelled for Mrs. Hirschfeld to come help her. She's screaming, 'Elsie! Elsie!'"

"A lot of good that'll do her! The old broad's deaf as a post."

"Sure, she'd sleep through anything. Right there in the next room, too. But poor old Mrs. Rosenzweig, she must've got them mad with all her yelling, because they hit her—hard. Oh, you should've seen her face! And they wrapped their arms around her neck and, do you know, they almost strangled her. She was just lying there, trying to breathe, and then she felt some others yank the sheet and blanket down, then they turned her on her stomach and pushed her face into the pillow, and she could feel their hands on her ankles, hauling her legs apart—the nightgown was actually ripped right up the side—and then another one of them pulled it up over her waist…"

Miss Pascua paused for breath. "Jesus," said Calzone, "don't it make you just want to—" He shook his head. "It musta been the blacks. No one else coulda done a thing like that. I mean, to them one woman's the same as any other, they don't care how old she is, or if she's maybe got a handicap or something, just so long as she's white. You know, they caught this guy over on 76th Street, in one of them welfare hotels, he was going around with a stocking over his head—"

The elevator door slid open and my grandfather stepped out. He waved and started across the lobby. Behind me Miss Pascua had interrupted the other's story and was plunging breathlessly on, as if impatient to reach the climax of her own.

“And then, she says, there was this soft, scratching sound, real close to her ear. She says it was like someone rubbing his hands together from the cold. That’s when— Well, it sure doesn’t sound like any rape I ever heard of. All she’d keep saying was it felt like getting slapped. I mean it, that’s just what she said.”

My grandfather had reached me in time to overhear this. “God,” he whispered, shaking his head, “it’s absolutely unbelievable, isn’t it? A woman that age—a poor defenseless blind woman…”

“And the most horrible thing of all,” Miss Pascua was saying, “she told me that the whole time, with all the things they did to her, they never spoke a single word.”

Age-yellowed eyes opened infinitesimally wider. Wrinkled heads turned slowly as I passed. The second floor was crowded that day; I felt as if I were striding through a world of garden gnomes: old folks on the benches by the elevator, old folks standing motionless in the hall, old folks in listless conversation round the doorway to the game room. These were the same ones who congregated in the lobby each morning, waiting for the mailman to arrive, and who began gathering outside the dining room hours before mealtime. Now they had drifted up here, unmindful of the heat, to partake of what little drama yet remained from the events of Sunday night.

I was glad my grandfather wasn’t one of them. At least he still got out. I’d said good-bye to him only a minute or two ago when, following the usual coffee and conversation with Pistachio, he’d retired upstairs for his afternoon nap. I hadn’t told him about my suspicions, or what I intended to do. He would never have understood.

It wasn’t hard to find where Mrs. Rosenzweig had been living; that end of the corridor had been screened off from the rest behind a folding canvas partition, the sort of thing hospitals use to screen the sick from one another and the dead from those alive. A small knot of residents stood chatting in front, as if waiting to see some performance inside. They regarded me with interest as I approached; I suppose that during the past few days they’d been treated to a stream of detectives and police photographers, and took me for another one.

“Have you caught them yet?” one of the ladies demanded.

“Not yet,” I said, “but there may be one very good lead.”

Indeed, I intended to supply it myself. I must have sounded confident, because they moved respectfully aside for me, and I heard them repeating to each other, “A good lead, he says they have a good lead,” as I made my way around the screen.

Mrs. Rosenzweig’s door was ajar. Sunlight flooded the room through an open window. Inside, two beefy-looking men sat perspiring over a radio, listening to a Yankees game. Neither of them was in uniform—one wore a plaid short-sleeve shirt, the other just a T-shirt and shorts—but the former, the younger of the two, had a silver badge hanging from his shirt pocket. They had been laughing about some aspect of the game, but when they saw me in the doorway their smiles disappeared.

“You got a reason to be here, buddy?” asked the one with the badge. He got up from the windowsill where he’d been sitting.

“Well, it’s nothing very important.” I stepped into the room. “There’s something I wanted to call to your attention, that’s all. Just in case you haven’t already considered it. I was downstairs earlier today, and I overheard a woman who works here saying that—”

“Whoa, whoa, hold it,” he said. “Now just slow down a second. What’s your interest in all this anyway?”

Above the clamor of the radio (which neither of them made a move to turn down) I explained that I’d been visiting my grandfather, who lived here at the Manor. “I come by almost every week,” I said. “In fact, I even had a slight acquaintance with Mrs. Rosenzweig and her roommate.”

I saw the two cops exchange a quick glance—Oh my God, I thought, what if these bastards think I did it?—but the attack of paranoia proved short-lived, for I watched their expressions change from wary to indifferent to downright impatient as I told them what Miss Pascua had said.

“She said something about a foul smell, a sort of ‘gutter smell.’ And so it just occurred to me—I don’t know, maybe you’ve checked this out already—it occurred to me that the logical group of suspects might be right outside.” I pointed through the open window, toward the gaping brown sewage ditch that stretched along the sidewalk like a wound. “See? They’ve been working down there for at least a month or so, and they probably had access to the building.”

The man in the T-shirt had already turned back to the game. The other gave me a halfhearted nod. “Believe me, mister,” he said, “we’re checking out every possibility. We may not look like it to you, but we do a pretty thorough job.”

“Fine, that’s fine, just so long as you intend to talk to them—”

The man in the T-shirt looked up. “We do,” he said. “It’s being done. Thank you very much for coming forward. Now why don’t you just give my partner here your name, address, and phone number in case we have to contact you.” He reached out and turned up the volume on the radio.

Laboriously the other one took down the information; he seemed far more concerned with getting the spelling of my name right than with anything else I’d had to say. While he wrote I looked around the room—at the discolorations in the plaster, the faded yellow drapes, a lilac sachet on the bureau, a collection of music boxes on a shelf. It didn’t look much like the scene of a crime, except for strips of black masking tape directing one’s attention to certain parts of the walls and floor. Four strips framed the light switch, another four an overturned table lamp, presumably for guests. Beside it stood a clock with its dial exposed so that a blind person could read it. The bed, too, was bordered by tape, the sheet and blanket still in violent disarray. With sunlight streaming in it was hard to imagine what had happened here: the old woman, the darkness, the sounds…

Snapping shut his notebook, the younger cop thanked me and walked with me to the door. Beyond it stood the canvas screen, blocking out the view, though in the space between the canvas and the floor I could see a line of stubby little shoes and hear the shrill chatter of old ladies. Well, I told

myself, maybe I didn't get to play Sherlock Holmes, but at least I've done my duty.

"We'll call you if there's anything we need," said the cop, practically shutting the door in my face. As it swung closed I saw, for the first time, that there were four strips of masking tape near the top, around a foot square, enclosing a familiar-looking shape.

"Wait a second," I said. "What's that?"

The door swung back. He saw where I was pointing. "Don't touch it," he said. "We found it there on the door. That tape's for the photographer and the fingerprint guys."

Standing on tiptoe, I took a closer look. Yes, I had seen it before—the outline of a crude, five-pointed holly leaf scratched lightly into the wood. The scratch marks extended outward from the shape in messy profusion, but none penetrated inside.

"You know," I said, "I saw the same thing a few weeks ago on the wall of the laundry room."

"Yeah, the super already told us. Anything else?"

I shook my head. It wasn't till hours later, back in the solitude of my apartment, that I realized I had seen the shape in still another place.

They say the night remembers what the day forgets. Pulling out the crudely bound orange book, I opened it to one of the drawings. There it was, that shape again, in the outline of the flipper-like gauntlets which Pistachio claimed his usurpadores had worn.

I got up and made myself some tea, then returned to the living room. Karen was still at her Wednesday-evening class, and would not be back till nearly ten. For a long time I sat very still, with the book open on my lap, listening to the comforting rattle of the air conditioner as it blotted out the night. One memory kept intruding: how, as a child, I liked to take a pencil and trace

around the edges of my hand. This shape, I knew, is one that every child learns to draw.

I wondered what it would look like if the child's hands were webbed.

Wednesday, July 13

Certain things are not supposed to happen before midnight. There's a certain category of events—certain freak encounters and discoveries, certain crimes—for which mere nighttime doesn't seem quite dark enough. Only after midnight, after most of the world is asleep and the laws of the commonplace suspended, only then are we prepared for a touch, however brief, of the impossible.

But that night the impossible didn't wait.

The sun had been down for exactly an hour. It was twenty minutes after nine o'clock. My grandfather and I were sitting edgily in his room, listening to news on the radio and waiting for the weather to come on. The past three days had been exceptionally hot, but tonight there was a certain tension, that feeling of impending rain. In the window beside us churned an antiquated little air conditioner, competing with the blare of soul and salsa from the street below. Occasionally we could see flashes of heat lightning far away to the north, lighting up the sky like distant bombs.

We were waiting for Father Pistachio, who was already several minutes late. I had promised to take both of them to an evening flute recital at Temple Ohav Sholom on 84th Street, on the other side of Broadway. There'd be a lot of old people in attendance, or so Grandfather believed. According to his calculations, the "boring part"—that is, the actual flute playing—would be over soon, and with a little luck the three of us would arrive just in time for the refreshments. I wondered if Pistachio was going to show up in his priest's collar, and what they'd make of it at the temple.

The radio announced the time. It was nine twenty-two.

"What the hell's keeping him?" said my grandfather. "We really ought to be getting over there. The ladies always leave early." He got up from the bed.

“What do you think? This shirt look okay?”

“You’re not wearing any socks.”

“What?” He glared down at his feet. “Oy gevalt, it’s a wonder I remember my own name!” Looking extremely dejected, he sat back on the bed but immediately jumped up again. “I know where the damn things are. I stuck them in with Esther Feinbaum’s wash.” He began moving toward the door.

“Wait a second,” I said. “Where are you going?”

“Downstairs. I’ll be right back.”

“But that’s ridiculous! Why make a special trip?” I fought down my exasperation. “Look, you’ve got plenty of socks right there in your drawer. Karen just bought you some, remember? The others’ll wait till tomorrow.”

“They may not be there tomorrow. Old Esther leaves ’em hanging down by the dryers. She doesn’t like to have men in her room!” He grinned. “Anyway, you don’t understand. They’re my lucky socks, the ones your mother made. I had ’em washed special for tonight, and I’m not going without ’em.”

I watched him shuffle out the door. He seemed to be aging faster, and moving slower, with each passing week.

“The time,” said the radio, “is nine twenty-five.”

I went to the window and looked down. Plenty of people were out on the sidewalk, drinking or dancing or sitting on the stoop, but there was no sign of Pistachio. He had said something about bringing me some “new proof” of his theory, and I tried to imagine what it could be. A rabbi with a Costa Rican accent, perhaps, or a Xo Tl’mi-go skull. Or maybe just a photo of the back of his own head. I stood there while the wind from the air conditioner blew cold against my skin, watching heat lightning flash in the distance. Then I sat down and returned to the news. Karen would be on her way home, just about now, from her class up at Lehman in the Bronx. I wondered if it was raining up there. The radio didn’t say.

Nine minutes later it happened. Suddenly the lights in Grandfather's room dimmed, flickered, and died. The radio fell silent. The air conditioner clattered to a halt.

I sat there in the darkness feeling faintly annoyed. The first thing that crossed my mind, I remember, was that somehow, perhaps in opening one of the dryers, Grandfather had inadvertently triggered a short circuit. Yes, I thought, that would be just like him!

In the unaccustomed silence I heard a frightened yell, then another, coming from the hall. They were joined, in a moment, by shouts from down in the street. Only then did I realize that more than just the building was affected. It was the whole city. We were having a blackout.

Still, even then, it seemed a minor annoyance. We'd had many such episodes before, in summers past, and I thought I knew what to expect. The city's overloaded current would dip momentarily; lights would flicker, clocks lose time, record players slow so that the voices turned to growls—and then, a few seconds later, the current would come back. Afterward we'd get the usual warnings about going easy on appliances, and everyone would turn his air conditioner down a degree or two. Perhaps this time the problem might be a little more severe, but it was still nothing to get excited about. Con Ed would fix things in a moment. They always had…

Already it had grown hot inside the room. I switched the lamp on and off, on and off, with that sense of incomprehension and resentment one feels when a familiar object, something that's supposed to work, suddenly and mysteriously does not. Well, well, I thought, The Machine Stops. I went to the window, opened it, and peered into the darkness. There were no streetlights to be seen, and the sidewalk below me was almost invisible; it was as if I were looking down upon a courtyard or a river, though I could hear a babble of excited voices down there, voices and pounding feet and slamming doors. Buildings I could see a little better, and all of them looked dead, massive black monoliths against a black sky, with the moon just a sliver on the horizon. Across the water New Jersey was still lit, its brightness reflected in the Hudson, but here the only light came from the files of cars moving tentatively up Amsterdam and Broadway. In the glow of their headlights I could see faces at the windows of some of the other

buildings, gazing out as I was, with varying degrees of wonder or curiosity or fear. From the street below came the sound of breaking glass.

It roused my sense of urgency, that sound. I wasn't worried about Karen—she'd get home okay—and no doubt old Pistachio, if he hadn't left yet, would have the sense to sit tight till the lights came on again.

But Grandfather was another story. For all I knew the old fool was trapped down there in a pitch-black laundry room without a single sound or ray of light to guide him. Perhaps he was unable to locate the door; perhaps he was terrified. I had to get down there to him. Feeling my way to the night table, I pocketed a book of matches from beside his pipe rack and moved slowly toward the hall.

Outside I could hear the residents shouting to one another from their doorways, their voices querulous and frightened. "Frito!" they were shouting. "Where's Frito?" Blindly I continued toward the stairs, inching my way across the polished floor. "Frito? Is that Frito?" an old lady called out as I passed. She sounded on the edge of panic. Immediately others up and down the hall took up the cry. "Frito, is it a blackout?" "Frito, do you have a flashlight?" "Frito, I want to call my son!"

"For God's sake, stop it!" I shouted. "I'm not Frito—see?" I lit a match in front of my face. It probably made me look like a cadaver. "Now just stay in your rooms and keep calm," I said. "We'll get the lights on for you as soon as we can."

I felt my way past the elevator, now useless, and went on until I'd reached the top of the stairs, where I lit another match. The first step lay just beneath my foot. Holding onto the metal railing, I started down.

As a boy I'd been afraid of the dark—or, more specifically, of monsters. I knew they only inhabited the world of movies, but sometimes in the dark it would occur to me that I, too, might be performing, all unwittingly, in a movie, perhaps even in the dread role of victim. There were two things movie victims never did, at least (alas) in my day: they never swore, and they never uttered brand names. Knowing this, I'd hit upon an ingenious way to keep my courage up. Whenever I was forced to brave the darkness,

whether in the cellar or the attic or even my own room, I'd chant the magic words "Fuck" and "Pepsi-Cola" and I knew that I'd be safe.

Somehow, though, I doubted that these words—or any words, in any tongue—would still be so effective. Magic wasn't what it used to be; I would simply have to put one foot in front of the other and take my chances.

Echoes of voices floated up the stairwell—cries for assistance, for candles, for news. Others were calling out to friends. At each floor the cries would get louder, diminishing again as I passed on toward the next. While I descended I kept a tight grip on the railing, nervously feeling my way around the landings where the railing came to an end. The eighth floor disappeared behind me, and the seventh; I counted them off in my head. The sixth… The fifth… Passing the fourth floor, I saw a moving light on the stairway beneath and heard footsteps advancing upward. Then the light veered through a doorway and was lost from sight. One floor down I heard Calzone's voice and saw a flashlight beam receding down the hall. "No, you can't go nowhere," he was shouting, "it's blacked out all the way to Westchester. Con Ed says they're working on it now. They'll get it all fixed up before too long." I hoped he was right.

As I passed the second floor I began to hear a noise which, at the time, I couldn't identify: a hollow, rhythmic, banging noise from down below, like someone hammering on a coffin. I couldn't even tell where it was coming from, unless from the wall itself, for the hammering became louder as I continued my descent, reaching its loudest point almost midway between the two floors—after which, unlike the voices, it began growing fainter again. By the time I reached the first floor it was lost amid the noises from the street.

They were having a festival out there, or a riot. I could hear shouts, laughter, and Latin music from some battery-driven tape deck. I also heard the shattering of glass, and what I first mistook for gunshots, but which I later realized were only firecrackers left over from the Fourth. Despite the clamor outside, the lobby wore an air of desolation, like an abandoned palace in time of war. As I rounded the stairs I caught a glimpse of its high, mirrored wall and, in it, dim reflections of the rubber plants, the mantelpiece, the sagging, empty chairs. The room was illuminated by a

lantern that flickered in the alcove in front. Nearby stood the new security guard, talking to a group of shadowy figures in the doorway. I remember wondering whether he'd be called upon to keep the neighborhood at bay tonight, and whether he'd be able to do so.

But at the moment that didn't seem important. Finding the railing again, I continued downward. The lantern light vanished with a turn in the stairs, and I found myself once more in total darkness. Already the first floor's noise seemed far behind; my footsteps, deliberate as they were, echoed softly from the walls. Seconds later I felt the railing end, and knew I'd reached the landing. Here I paused for breath, fingers pressed against the rough concrete. The air was suffocating; I felt as if I were chin-deep in warm water, and that if I stepped forward I would drown. Digging into my pocket, I found a match and, like a blind man, lit it. Walls leapt into view around me. I felt better now—though for a moment an old warning flashed through my mind about people smothering in locked vaults because they'd lit matches and burned up their oxygen. Silly, I thought, it's nothing but a basement—and proceeded down the final flight of steps.

At last my feet touched bottom. I lit another match and saw, ahead of me, the narrow corridor stretching into darkness. As I followed it, I listened. There was no sound. The match burned my fingers and I dropped it. "Grandfather?" I called, in the half-embarrassed voice of one not sure of a response. "Grandfather?" I thought I heard a stirring from farther down the hall, like something being scraped across a cement floor. "It's okay, I'm coming!" Lighting still another match, I made my way toward the door to the laundry room. Even at this distance I could smell the moist, sweet laundry smell and, beneath it, something sour, like a backed-up drain. Sewer men, I thought, and shook my head.

When I was still a step or two away, the match went. Blindly I groped for the door. I could hear someone on the other side, scrabbling to get out. At last my fingers found the knob. "It's okay," I said, turning it, "I'm here—"

The door exploded in my face. I went down beneath a mob of twisting bodies pouring through the doorway, tumbling out upon me like a wave. I was kicked, tripped over, stepped on; I struggled to rise, and felt, in the darkness, the touch of naked limbs, smooth, rubbery flesh, hands that

scuttled over me like starfish. In seconds the mob had swept past me and was gone; I heard them padding lightly up the hall, heading toward the stairs.

Then silence.

I lay back on the floor, exhausted, unable to believe it was over. I knew that, in a little while, I would not be able to believe it had happpened at all. Though they'd left the stench of sewage in my nostrils, the gang—whatever they were, wherever they had gone—already seemed a crazy dream born of the darkness and the heat.

But Grandfather was real. What had they done to him? Trembling, head spinning, I staggered to my feet and found the doorway to the laundry room. Inside I lit one last match. The floor shone wet and slippery; the four washers lay scattered across it like children's discarded toys. There was no sign of my grandfather.

Hours later, when they pulled him from the elevator stalled midway between the first and second floors—Frito with his crowbar, Calzone holding the light—all my grandfather would say (feebly waving the two little pieces of dark cloth as if they were trophies) was, "I found my socks."

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Karen, all this time, was fifty blocks uptown.

At nine-thirty she and her friend Marcia had been driving home in Marcia's little white Toyota, returning from their evening class at Lehman. There'd been an obstruction at 145th Street, and Marcia had turned south onto Lenox Avenue, past the Lenox Terrace project and the blocks of ancient brownstones. Though the traffic was heavy tonight, they were making good time; a mile ahead, at Central Park, they would be turning west. The air inside the car was hot and stuffy, but they kept the doors locked and the windows rolled up tight. This was, after all, the middle of Harlem.

Suddenly, as if some child had yanked the plug, the lights went out.

Marcia's foot went instinctively to the brakes; the car slowed to a crawl. So did the cars in front and behind. A few, elsewhere, did not. From somewhere up ahead came a grinding crash and the sound of tearing metal. Horns blared, bumpers smashed against bumpers, and the traffic rolled to a standstill. Beyond the unmoving line of headlights there was nothing but darkness.

But all at once the darkness was filled with moving shapes.

"Oh my God," said Marcia. "Look!"

Up and down the blackened street, hordes of figures were rushing from the houses, cheering, clapping, arms waving, as if they'd been waiting all their lives for this moment. It reminded the women of a prison break, an end of school, a day of liberation. They saw one tall, gangling figure burst through a doorway and dash into the street directly in front of them. Suddenly, in sheer exuberance, he bounded high into the air, feet kicking like a ballet dancer's, and sailed clear across the hood of the car, landing moments later on the other side and disappearing into the night. Karen never got to see his face, but there was one image she'd remember long afterward, whenever the blackout was discussed: the image of those two white sneakers dancing high above the beam of the headlights, six feet in the air, as if somehow released, not just from man's law, but from the law of gravity as well.

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It was nearly one o'clock, and I still couldn't reach her.

I was sitting in Grandfather's room with the phone cradled in my lap. Beside me the old man lay snoring. I had put him to bed only a few minutes before but he'd already fallen asleep, exhausted from his ordeal in the elevator. There would be no sleep for me, though: I was too worried about Karen, and events outside the window only made me worry more. I heard hoarse shouts, the shattering of glass, and gangs of youths passing unseen in the streets below, bragging to each other about the jewelry, clothes, and radios they'd robbed. On Amsterdam Avenue a crowd had formed in front of the pawnshop, and three dark burly men, naked to the waist, were struggling to tear down the metal security gate that stretched across the

window and the door. Others, holding flashlights, were egging them on. There were distant fires to the north, and sirens, and the echoes of explosions. I was almost beginning to think of myself as a widower.

Suddenly, on my lap, the phone began to ring. (Telephones were not affected by the power failure, being part of a separate electrical system.) I snatched it to my ear before Grandfather awoke.

“Goddammit, Karen, where the hell were you all this time? I’ve been trying you for hours. Couldn’t you at least have picked up a phone—”

“I couldn’t,” she said. “Honestly. I haven’t been near a phone all night.”

Her voice sounded far away. “Where are you now,” I said, “at Marcia’s? I tried there, too.”

“Believe it or not, I’m up here at the Cloisters.”

“What?”

“It’s true—the castle’s right behind me, completely dark. I’m in a phone booth near the parking lot. There’s a whole bunch of people up here, it’s really beautiful. I can see stars I’ve never seen before.”

For all her seeming rapture, I thought I detected a thin edge of hysteria in her voice—and when she told me what had happened, I understood why.

She and Marcia had spent the first part of the blackout sitting terrified in their car, watching things go to pieces around them. Store windows were being smashed, doors broken down; people were running past them waving torches. Others hurried back and forth along the avenue in a travesty of Christmas shopping, their arms weighed down with merchandise. Amid such activity those trapped within the cars had been ignored, but there’d been a few bad moments, and help had been slow to arrive. With stoplights out all over the city and traffic tied up everywhere at once, the accident had cost them nearly an hour.

Even when the line of cars began rolling again, they made little speed, creeping through the dark streets like a funeral cortege, their headlights providing the sole illumination—though here and there the eastern sky across the Harlem River seemed to glow with unseen fires. As they drew farther south the crowds grew thicker, crowds who made no effort to move aside for them. More than once their way was blocked by piles of burning refuse; more than once a fist would pound against the car door and a black face would glare fiercely through the window. Continuing in their present course seemed madness, and when some obstruction several blocks ahead seemed likely to halt them a second time, Marcia turned up the first wide thoroughfare they came to, 125th Street, and drove west in the direction of the Hudson, narrowly avoiding the bands of looters stockpiling food crates in the center of the street. At Riverside Drive, instead of resuming their way south, on impulse they had headed in the opposite direction, eager to get as far from the city as they could. They had driven all the way to Fort Tryon Park, at the northern tip of the island.

"We've both had a chance to calm down now," she added. "We're ready to start back. Marcia's getting tired, and both of us want to get home. We're going to take the West Side Highway all the way to 96th, so we shouldn't have any problems. But I swear to God, if we see another black I hope we hit him!"

I said I hoped that wouldn't be necessary, and made her promise to call me as soon as she got home. I was going to spend the night here in Grandfather's room.

After hanging up, I turned back to the action in the street below. Over on Amsterdam the crowd had succeeded in pulling down the pawnshop's metal gate. The large display window had already been stripped bare; glass littered the sidewalk. Now they were lined up in front of the shop like patrons at a movie theater, patiently awaiting their turn to file inside and take something. It was clear that the ones at the end of the line were not going to find much left. They passed the time by breaking the shards of glass into smaller pieces. The sound reminded me, somehow, of films I'd seen of Nazi Germany. It set my teeth on edge.

Suddenly there was a cry of “Cuidado!” and the crowd melted away. A minute passed, and then, like twin spaceships from another world, a pair of blue-and-white police cars rolled silently up the avenue, red lights whirling on their roofs. They paused, and from each car a searchlight beam swept dispassionately over the ruins of the shop. Then the searchlights were switched off, and the cars moved on, unhurried and silent. The crowd returned moments later. The sound of breaking glass continued through the night.

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There were thousands of similar stories that night. There was the story of the man who pulled up before an appliance store in a rented truck and carted off a whole block of refrigerators; and the story of the twelve-year-old black boy who walked up to a white woman on the street and nearly strangled her when he tried to wrench a string of pearls from her neck; and the story, repeated many times, of mobs racing through the aisles of five-and-tens, stealing ribbons, erasers, spools of thread, shoes that didn’t fit—anything they could lay their hands on, anything they saw. For months afterward the people of the poorer black sections of Brooklyn were forced to do their shopping miles from home because the stores in their own neighborhoods had been destroyed. By the time the blackout was over, nine million people had gone a day without electricity, three thousand had been arrested for looting with thousands more unpunished, and a billion dollars in damages had been lost.

But amid the statistics and postmortems, the newspaper stories and police reports, there were other reports—“unsubstantiated rumors,” the Times called them—of roaming whites glimpsed here and there in the darker corners of the city, whites dressed “oddly,” or undressed, or “emaciated” looking, or “masked,” terrorizing the women of the neighborhood and hiding from the light. A woman in Crown Heights said she’d come upon a “white boy” thrusting his hand between her infant daughter’s legs, but that he’d run away before she got a look at him. A Hunts Point girl swore that, minutes after the blackout began, a pack of “skinny old men” had come swarming up from the basement of an abandoned building and had chased her up the block. At the Astoria Boulevard subway stop near Hell Gate, an

electrical worker had heard someone—a woman or a child—sobbing on the tracks where, hours before, a stalled train had been evacuated, and had seen, in his flashlight's beam, a group of distant figures fleeing through the tunnel. Hours later a man with a Spanish accent had telephoned the police to complain, in broken English, that his wife had been molested by "kids" living in the subway. He had rung off without giving his name. A certain shopping-bag lady, subject of a humorous feature in the Enquirer, even claimed to have had sexual relations with a "Martian" who, after rubbing his naked groin, had groped blindly beneath her dress; she had a long history of alcoholism, though, and her account was treated as a joke. The following September the News and the Post ran indignant reports on the sudden hike in abortions among the city's poor—but then, such stories, like those of climbing birth rates nine months later, are part and parcel of every blackout.

If I seem to credit these stories unduly—to dwell on them, even—it's because of what had happened to me in the basement, at the start of the blackout, and because of another incident, far more terrible, which occurred later that night. Since then some years have elapsed; and now, with Karen's permission, I can speak of it.

***

The two of them had driven back without mishap. Marcia had left Karen off in front of our apartment and had waited till she got inside. After all that they had been through that night, the neighborhood seemed an oasis of safety. There'd been stores broken into on Columbus, but our block, by this time, was relatively quiet. It was 2:15 a.m.

Unlocking the door, Karen felt her way into the kitchen and, with some difficulty, located a dusty box of Sabbath candles, one of which she lit on the top burner of the stove. A thin white stream of candle wax ran, wormlike, down her hand; she stood the candle upon a saucer to protect the rug. Moving slowly so that the flame would not go out, she walked into the bedroom, pausing to open the window and let some air into the room. She noticed, with some irritation, that it was already halfway open; someone had been careless, and it wasn't her. She would have to remember to mention it to me when she called. The phone was there before her on the

night table. Carefully, in the flickering light, she dialed Grandfather's number.

I had been nodding off, lulled by the rhythm of Grandfather's snoring, when the telephone jerked me awake. For a moment I forgot where I was, but then I heard Karen's voice.

"Well," she said, "here I am, safe and sound, and absolutely exhausted. One thing's good, at least I won't have to go to work tomorrow. I feel like I could use a good twelve hours' sleep, though it'll probably be pretty unbearable in here tonight without the air conditioner. There's a funny smell, too. I just took a peek in the refrigerator, and all that meat you bought's going to spoil unless—Oh God, what's that?"

I heard her scream. She screamed several times. Then there was a thud, and then a jarring succession of bangs as the phone was dropped and left dangling from the edge of the table.

And then, in the background, I heard it: a sound so similar to the one coming from the bed behind me that for one horrifying second I'd confused the two.

It was the sound of snoring.

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Nine flights of stairs and a dozen blocks later I stumbled from the darkness into the darkness of our apartment. The police had not arrived yet, but Karen had already regained consciousness, and a candle burned once more upon the table. A two-inch purple welt just below her hairline showed where, in falling, she had hit the table's edge.

I was impressed by how well she was bearing up. Even though she'd awakened alone in the dark, she had managed to keep herself busy: after relighting the candle and replacing the telephone, she had methodically gone about locking all the windows and had carefully washed the stickiness from her legs. In fact, by the time I got there she seemed remarkably composed, at least for the moment—composed enough to tell me, in a fairly

level voice, about the thing she'd seen drop soundlessly into the room, through the open window, just as another one leaped toward her from the hall and a third, crouched gaunt and pale behind the bed, rose up and, reaching forward, pinched the candle out.

Her composure slipped a bit—and so did mine—when, six hours later, the morning sunlight revealed a certain shape scratched like a marker in the brick outside our bedroom window.

Six weeks later, while we were still living at her mother's house in Westchester, the morning bouts of queasiness began. The tests came back negative, negative again, then positive. Whatever was inside her might well have been mine—we had, ironically, decided some time before to let nature take its course—but we took no chances. The abortion cost only $150, and we got a free lecture from a Right to Life group picketing in front. We never asked the doctor what the wretched little thing inside her looked like, and he never showed the least inclination to tell us.

Wednesday, February 14, 1979

"'Young men think that old men are fools,'" said Mrs. Rosenzweig, quoting with approval one of my grandfather's favorite sayings, "'but old men know that young men are fools.'" She pursed her lips doubtfully. "Of course," she added, "that wouldn't apply to you."

I laughed. "Of course not! Besides, I'm not so young anymore."

It had been exactly a year since I'd last seen her; having arrived today with a big red box of Valentine's Day chocolates for her, I was glad to find her still alive—and still living at the Manor. Despite the night of terror she'd suffered back in '77, she had returned here as soon as she'd been discharged from the hospital, believing herself too old for a change of scene, too old to make new friends. The Manor was her home, and she was determined to stay.

Here, inside her own room, it was virtually impossible to tell that she was blind (just as I had been fooled the first time I'd met her); habit had taught her the location of every article, every piece of furniture. But elsewhere in

the building, with her former roommate, Mrs. Hirschfeld, no longer there to lean on, she'd felt helpless and alone—until my grandfather'd acted the gentleman. He had befriended her, made her feel secure; they had walked along Broadway together, traded stories of the past, and kept each other company through the long summer afternoons. For a while, he had replaced Mrs. Hirschfeld in her life; she had replaced poor old Father Pistachio in his...

"Did I ever show you what Herman gave me?" Unerringly she picked a small round object from the shelf beside her and began winding a key in its base. It appeared to be a miniature globe of the world, with a decal on the base proclaiming "Souvenir of Hayden Planetarium." When she set it back on the shelf, it played the opening bars of "Home Sweet Home."

"That's very nice."

The music ran on a few seconds more, then died in the air. The old woman sighed.

"It was nice of you to bring that chocolate. That's just the kind of thing your grandfather would have done. He was always very generous."

"Yes," I said, "he was. He never had much, but he was devoted to his friends."

The chocolate—in fact, the visit itself—had been my way of commemorating this day. It was the first anniversary of his death.

He had died following another stroke, just as the doctors had predicted—one of the few times in his life that he'd acted according to prediction. It had happened after dinner, while he'd been sitting in the game room with several of his cronies, laughing heartily at one of his own jokes. Laughter, Svevo tells us, is the only form of violent exercise old men are still permitted, but perhaps in this case the violence had been too much. Rushed to the hospital, he had lingered less than a week. I don't believe his end was a hard one. His last words are unrecorded, which is probably just as well—what are anyone's last words, after all, except a curse, a cry for help, or a string of nonsense?—but the last words I ever heard him say, and which

have now become a family legend, were addressed to a young intern, fresh out of med school, who had come to take his blood pressure. During this process the old man had remained silent—speaking had become extremely difficult—and his eyes were closed; I assumed he was unconscious. But when the intern, putting away his instruments, happened to mention that he had a date waiting for him that night as soon as he got off work, my grandfather opened his eyes and said, in what was little more than a whisper, "Ask her if she's got a friend for me."

And Father Pistachio—he, too, is gone now, gone even before my grandfather. Although he has never been listed as such, he remains, as far as I'm concerned, the only likely fatality of the Great 1977 Blackout. It appears that, at the moment the power failed, he'd been on his way to visit Grandfather and me in the Manor, a short walk up the street. Beyond that it's impossible to say, for no one saw what happened to him. Maybe, in the darkness, he got frightened and ran off, maybe he had a run-in with the same gang that attacked me, maybe he simply fell down a rabbit hole and disappeared. I have one or two suspicions of my own—suspicions about the blackout itself, in fact, and whether it was really Con Ed's fault—but such speculations only get my wife upset. All we really know is that the old man vanished without a trace, though Grandfather later claimed to have seen a white paper bag lying crumpled and torn near the stoop of Pistachio's house.

As for his effects, the contents of his room, I am not the one to ask—and the one to ask is dead. Grandfather was supposed to have gone over and inquired about them, but he told me he'd been "given the runaround" by the superintendent of the building, a gruff Puerto Rican man who understood almost no English. The super had maintained that he'd given all Pistachio's belongings to the "policia," but I wouldn't be surprised if, in fact, he'd kept for himself the things he thought of value and had thrown away the rest. Still, I like to pretend that somewhere, in a storeroom down the dusty corridors of some obscure city department, hidden away in some footlocker or cubbyhole or file shelf, there lies the old priest's great work—the notes and maps and photos, the pages of English translation—complete with all the "new material" he'd hinted of.

One thing, at least, has survived. The super, a religious man (or perhaps just superstitious), had held back one of Pistachio's books, believing it to be a Bible, and this he allowed my grandfather to take. In a sense he was right, it was a Bible—the 1959 Harper & Row edition of The Gospel According to Thomas, which now stands on my desk looking very scholarly next to the cheap Spanish version of his "Commentary." The book holds little interest for me, nor is it particularly rare, but I find it makes an excellent memento of its former owner, thanks to the hundreds of annotations in Pistachio's crabbed hand: tiny comments scribbled in the margins, "sí" and "indudable!" and even one "caramba!" along with some more cryptic —"Ync." and "Qch." and "X.T."—and pages and pages of underlinings. One passage, attributed to Christ himself, was actually circled in red ink:

Whoever feels the touch of my hand shall become as I am, and the hidden things shall be revealed to him… I am the All, and the All came forth from me. Cleave a piece of wood and you will find me; lift up a stone and I am there.

Beneath it he had written, "Está hecho." It is done.

I was feeling depressed as I said good-bye to Mrs. Rosenzweig. Though I agreed to visit her again soon, privately I doubted I'd be back before next year. Coming here aroused too many painful memories.

Outside, the world looked even bleaker. It was not yet 5:00 p.m., and already getting dark. We'd had below-freezing temperatures throughout the week and the pavement was covered with patches of snow. Turning up my collar against the icy wind, I headed up the block.

Now, one of the hoariest clichés of a certain type of cheap fiction—along with the mind that "suddenly goes blank," and the fearful town where everyone "clams up" when a stranger arrives, and the victimized industrialist who won't go to the police because "I don't want the publicity," and the underworld informer who says "I know who did it but I can't tell you over the phone"—along with these is the feeling of "being watched." One's flesh is supposed to crawl, one's hair to stand on end; one is supposed to have an "indefinable sense" that one is under scrutiny. The truth is not so mystical. In the course of my life I have stared, and stared

hard, at thousands of people who, were they the least bit sensitive, would have shivered or turned or perhaps even jumped in the air. None has ever done so. For that matter, I've undoubtedly been glared at by hundreds of people in my time without ever realizing it.

This time was the same. I was standing on the corner of 81st and Amsterdam, hunching my shoulders against the cold and waiting impatiently for the light to change. My mind was on the clean new restaurant across the street that advertised "Dominican and American Cuisine," right where Davey's Tavern used to stand. How nice, I said to myself. Things are looking up.

The light changed. I took one step off the curb, and heard something crackle underfoot. That was why I happened to look down. I saw that I had stepped upon a little mound of pistachio shells, red against the snow, piled by the opening to a sewer.

And I froze—for there was something in the opening, just beside my shoe: something watching intently, its face pressed up against the metal grating, its pale hands clinging tightly to the bars. I saw, dimly in the streetlight, the empty craters where its eyes had been—empty but for two red dots, like tiny beads—and the gaping red ring of its mouth, like the sucker of some undersea creature. The face was alien and cold, without human expression, yet I swear that those eyes regarded me with utter malevolence—and that they recognized me.

It must have realized that I'd seen it—surely it heard me cry out—for at that moment, like two exploding white stars, the hands flashed open and the figure dropped back into the earth, back to that kingdom, older than ours, that calls the dark its home.

Black Man With A Horn

The Black [words obscured by postmark] *was fascinating—I must get a snap shot of him.*

—H. P. Lovecraft, postcard to E. Hoffmann Price, 7/23/1934

There is something inherently comforting about the first-person past tense. It conjures up visions of some deskbound narrator puffing contemplatively upon a pipe amid the safety of his study, lost in tranquil recollection, seasoned but essentially unscathed by whatever experience he's about to relate. It's a tense that says, "I am here to tell the tale. I lived through it."

The description, in my own case, is perfectly accurate—as far as it goes. I am indeed seated in a kind of study: a small den, actually, but lined with bookshelves on one side, below a view of Manhattan painted many years ago, from memory, by my sister. My desk is a folding bridge table that once belonged to her. Before me the electric typewriter, though somewhat precariously supported, hums soothingly, and from the window behind me comes the familiar drone of the old air conditioner, waging its lonely battle against the tropic night. Beyond it, in the darkness outside, the small night-noises are doubtless just as reassuring: wind in the palm trees, the mindless chant of crickets, the muffled chatter of a neighbor's TV, an occasional car bound for the highway, shifting gears as it speeds past the house...

House, in truth, may be too grand a word; the place is a green stucco bungalow just a single story tall, third in a row of nine set several hundred yards from the highway. Its only distinguishing features are the sundial in the front yard, brought here from my sister's former home, and the jagged little picket fence, now rather overgrown with weeds, which she had erected despite the protests of neighbors.

It's hardly the most romantic of settings, but under normal circumstances it might make an adequate background for meditations in the past tense. "I'm still here," the writer says, adjusting to the tone. (I've even stuck the

requisite pipe in mouth, stuffed with a plug of latakia.) “It’s over now,” he says. “I lived through it.”

A comforting premise, perhaps. Only, in this case, it doesn’t happen to be true. Whether the experience is really “over now” no one can say; and if, as I suspect, the final chapter has yet to be enacted, then the notion of my “living through it” will seem a pathetic conceit.

Yet I can’t say I find the thought of my own death particularly disturbing. I get so tired, sometimes, of this little room, with its cheap wicker furniture, the dull outdated books, the night pressing in from outside... And of that sundial out there in the yard, with its idiotic message. “Grow old along with me...”

I have done so, and my life seems hardly to have mattered in the scheme of things. Surely its end cannot matter much either.

Ah, Howard, you would have understood.

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That, boy, was what I call a travel-experience!

—Lovecraft, 3/12/1930

If, while I set it down, this tale acquires an ending, it promises to be an unhappy one. But the beginning is nothing of the kind; you may find it rather humorous, in fact—full of comic pratfalls, wet trouser cuffs, and a dropped vomit-bag.

“I steeled myself to endure it,” the old lady to my right was saying. “I don’t mind telling you I was exceedingly frightened. I held on to the arms of the seat and just gritted my teeth. And then, you know, right after the captain warned us about that turbulence, when the tail lifted and fell, flip-flop, flip-flop, well—” she flashed her dentures at me and patted my wrist, “—I don’t mind telling you, there was simply nothing for it but to heave."

Where had the old girl picked up such expressions? And was she trying to pick me up as well? Her hand clamped wetly round my wrist. “I do hope you’ll let me pay for the dry cleaning.”

“Madam,” I said, “think nothing of it. The suit was already stained.”

“Such a nice man!” She cocked her head coyly at me, still gripping my wrist. Though their whites had long since turned the color of old piano keys, her eyes were not unattractive. But her breath repelled me. Slipping my paperback into a pocket, I rang for the stewardess.

The earlier mishap had occurred several hours before. In clambering aboard the plane at Heathrow, surrounded by what appeared to be an aboriginal rugby club (all dressed alike, navy blazers with bone buttons), I’d been shoved from behind and had stumbled against a black cardboard hatbox in which some Chinaman was storing his dinner; it was jutting into the aisle near the first-class seats. Something inside sloshed over my ankles— duck sauce, soup perhaps—and left a sticky yellow puddle on the floor. I turned in time to see a tall, beefy Caucasian with an Air Malay bag and a beard so thick and black he looked like some heavy from the silent era. His manner was equally suited to the role, for after shouldering me aside (with shoulders broad as my valises), he pushed his way down the crowded passage, head bobbing near the ceiling like a gas balloon, and suddenly disappeared from sight at the rear of the plane. In his wake I caught the smell of treacle, and was instantly reminded of my childhood: birthday hats, Callard and Bowser gift packs, and after-dinner bellyaches.

“So very sorry.” A bloated little Charlie Chan looked fearfully at this departing apparition, then doubled over to scoop his dinner beneath the seat, fiddling with the ribbon.

“Think nothing of it,” I said.

I was feeling kindly toward everyone that day. Flying was still a novelty. My friend Howard, of course (as I’d reminded audiences earlier in the week), used to say he’d “hate to see aeroplanes come into common commercial use, since they merely add to the goddam useless speeding up of an already overspeeded life.” He had dismissed them as “devices for the

amusement of a gentleman”— but then, he’d only been up once, in the twenties, and for only as long as $3.50 would bring. What could he have known of whistling engines, the wicked joys of dining at thirty thousand feet, the chance to look out a window and find that the earth is, after all, quite round? All this he had missed; he was dead and therefore to be pitied.

Yet even in death he had triumphed over me...

It gave me something to think about as the stewardess helped me to my feet, clucking in professional concern at the mess on my lap—though more likely she was thinking of the wiping up that awaited her once I’d vacated the seat. “Why do they make those bags so slippery?” my elderly neighbor asked plaintively. “And all over this nice man’s suit. You really should do something about it.” The plane dropped and settled; she rolled her yellowing eyes. “It could happen again.”

The stewardess steered me down the aisle toward a restroom at the middle of the plane. To my left a cadaverous young woman wrinkled her nose and smiled at the man next to her. I attempted to disguise my defeat by looking bitter—“Someone else has done this deed!”—but doubt I succeeded. The stewardess’s arm supporting mine was superfluous but comfortable; I leaned on her more heavily with each step. There are, as I’d long suspected, precious few advantages in being seventy-six and looking it—yet among them is this: though one is excused from the frustration of flirting with a stewardess, one gets to lean on her arm. I turned toward her to say something funny, but paused; her face was blank as a clock’s.

“I’ll wait out here for you,” she said, and pulled open the smooth white door.

“That will hardly be necessary.” I straightened up. “But could you—do you think you might find me another seat? I have nothing against that lady, you understand, but I don’t want to see any more of her lunch.”

Inside the restroom the whine of the engines seemed louder, as if the pink plastic walls were all that separated me from the jet stream and its arctic winds. Occasionally the air we passed through must have grown choppy, for the plane rattled and heaved like a sled over rough ice. If I opened the john I

half expected to see the earth miles below us, a frozen grey Atlantic fanged with icebergs. England was already a thousand miles away.

With one hand on the door handle for support, I wiped off my trousers with a perfumed paper towel from a foil envelope, and stuffed several more into my pocket. My cuffs still bore a residue of Chinese goo. This, it seemed, was the source of the treacle smell; I dabbed ineffectually at it. Surveying myself in the mirror—a bald, harmless-looking old baggage with stooped shoulders and a damp suit (so different from the self-confident young fellow in the photo captioned "HPL and disciple")—I slid open the bolt and emerged, a medley of scents. The stewardess had found an empty seat for me at the back of the plane.

It was only as I made to sit down that I noticed who occupied the adjoining seat: he was leaning away from me, asleep with his head resting against the window, but I recognized the beard.

"Uh, stewardess—?" I turned, but saw only her uniformed back retreating up the aisle. After a moment's uncertainty I inched myself into the seat, making as little noise as possible. I had, I reminded myself, every right to be here.

Adjusting the recliner position (to the annoyance of the black behind me), I settled back and reached for the paperback in my pocket. They'd finally gotten around to reprinting one of my earlier tales, and already I'd found four typos. But then, what could one expect? The front cover, with its crude cartoon skull, said it all: "Goosepimples: Thirteen Cosmic Chillers in the Lovecraft Tradition."

So this is what I was reduced to—a lifetime's work shrugged off by some blurb-writer as "worthy of the Master himself," the creations of my brain dismissed as mere pastiche. And the tales themselves, once singled out for such elaborate praise, were now simply—as if this were commendation enough—"Lovecraftian."

Ah, Howard, your triumph was complete the moment your name became an adjective.

I'd suspected it for years, of course, but only with the past week's conference had I been forced to acknowledge the fact: that what mattered to the present generation was not my own body of work, but rather my association with Lovecraft. And even this was demeaned: after years of friendship and support, to be labeled— simply because I'd been younger—a mere "disciple." It seemed too cruel a joke.

Every joke must have a punchline. This one's was still in my pocket, printed in italics on the folded yellow conference schedule. I didn't need to look at it again: there I was, characterized for all time as "a member of the Lovecraft circle, New York educator, and author of the celebrated collection Beyond the Garve."

That was it, the crowning indignity: to be immortalized by a misprint! You'd have appreciated this, Howard. I can almost hear you chuckling from —where else?—beyond the garve...

Meanwhile, from the seat next to me came the rasping sounds of a constricted throat; my neighbor must have been caught in a dream. I put down my book and studied him. He looked older than he had at first— perhaps sixty or more. His hands were roughened, powerful looking; on one of them was a ring with a curious silver cross. The glistening black beard that covered the lower half of his face was so thick as to be nearly opaque; its very darkness seemed unnatural, for above it the hair was streaked with grey.

I looked more closely, to where beard joined face. Was that a bit of gauze I saw, below the hair? My heart gave a little jump. Leaning forward for a closer look, I peered at the skin to the side of his nose; though burned from long exposure to the sun, it had an odd pallor. My gaze continued upward, along the weathered cheeks toward the dark hollows of his eyes.

They opened.

For a moment they stared into mine without apparent comprehension, glassy and bloodshot. In the next instant they were bulging from his head and quivering like hooked fish. His lips opened, and a tiny voice croaked, "Not here."

We sat in silence, neither of us moving. I was too surprised, too embarrassed, to answer. In the window beyond his head the sky looked bright and clear, but I could feel the plane buffeted by unseen blasts, its wingtips bouncing furiously.

“Don’t do it to me here,” he whispered at last, shrinking back into his seat.

Was the man a lunatic? Dangerous, perhaps? Somewhere in my future I saw spinning headlines: “Jetliner Terrorized... Retired NYC Teacher Victim... My uncertainty must have shown, for I saw him lick his lips and glance past my head. Hope, and a trace of cunning, swept his face. He grinned up at me. “Sorry, nothing to worry about. Whew! Must have been having a nightmare.” Like an athlete after a particularly tough race he shook his massive head, already regaining command of the situation. His voice had a hint of Tennessee drawl. “Boy”—he gave what should have been a hearty laugh—“I’d better lay off the Kickapoo juice!”

I smiled to put him at his ease, though there was nothing about him to suggest that he’d been drinking. “That’s an expression I haven’t heard in years.”

“Oh, yeah?” he said, with little interest. “Well, I’ve been away.” His fingers drummed nervously—impatiently?—on the arm of his chair.

“Malaya?”

He sat up, and the color left his face. “How did you know?”

I nodded toward the green flight-bag at his feet. “I saw you carrying that when you came aboard. You, uh—you seemed to be in a little bit of a hurry, to say the least. In fact, I’m afraid you almost knocked me down.”

“Hey.” His voice was controlled now, his gaze level and assured. “Hey, I’m really sorry about that, old fella. The fact is, I thought someone might be following me.”

Oddly enough, I believed him; he looked sincere—or as sincere as anyone can be behind a phony black beard. “You’re in disguise, aren’t you?” I

asked.

“You mean the whiskers? They’re just something I picked up in Singapore. Shucks, I knew they wouldn’t fool anyone for long, at least not a friend. But an enemy, well... maybe.” He made no move to take them off.

“You’re—let me guess—you’re in the service, right?” The foreign service, I meant; frankly, I took him for an aging spy.

“In the service?” He looked significantly to the left and right, then dropped his voice. “Well, yeah, you might say that. In His service.” He pointed toward the roof of the plane.

“You mean—?”

He nodded. “I’m a missionary. Or was until yesterday.”

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Missionaries are infernal nuisances who ought to be kept at home.

—Lovecraft, 9/12/1925

Have you ever seen a man in fear of his life? I had, though not since my early twenties. After a summer of idleness I’d at last found temporary employment in the office of what turned out to be a rather shady businessman—I suppose today you’d call him a smalltime racketeer—who, having somehow offended “the mob,” was convinced he’d be dead by Christmas. He had been wrong, though; he’d been able to enjoy that and many other Christmases with his family, and it wasn’t till years later that he was found in his bathtub, face down in six inches of water. I don’t remember much about him, except how hard it had been to engage him in conversation; he never seemed to be listening.

Yet talking with the man who sat next to me on the plane was all too easy; he had nothing of the other’s distracted air, the vague replies and preoccupied gaze. On the contrary, he was alert and highly interested in all

that was said to him. Except for his initial panic, in fact, there was little to suggest he was a hunted man.

Yet so he claimed to be. Later events would, of course, settle all such questions, but at the time I had no way to judge if he was telling the truth, or if his story was as phony as his beard.

If I believed him, it was almost entirely due to his manner, not the substance of what he said. No, he didn't claim to have made off with the Eye of Klesh; he was more original than that. Nor had he violated some witch doctor's only daughter. But some of the things he told me about the region in which he'd worked—a state called Negri Sembilan, south of Kuala Lumpur—seemed frankly incredible: houses invaded by trees, government-built roads that simply disappeared, a nearby colleague returning from a ten-day vacation to find his lawn overgrown with ropy things they'd had to burn twice to destroy. He claimed there were tiny red spiders that jumped as high as a man's shoulder—"there was a girl in the village gone half-deaf because one of the nasty little things crawled in her ear and swelled so big it plugged up the hole"—and places where mosquitoes were so thick they suffocated cattle. He described a land of steaming mangrove swamps and rubber plantations as large as feudal kingdoms, a land so humid that wallpaper bubbled on the hot nights and bibles sprouted mildew.

As we sat together on the plane, sealed within an air-cooled world of plastic and pastel, none of these things seemed possible; with the frozen blue of the sky just beyond my reach, the stewardesses walking briskly past me in their blue-and-gold uniforms, the passengers to my left sipping Cokes or sleeping or leafing through In-Flite, I found myself believing less than half of what he said, attributing the rest to sheer exaggeration and a Southern regard for tall tales. Only when I'd been home a week and paid a visit to my niece in Brooklyn did I revise my estimate upward, for glancing through her son's geography text I came upon this passage: "Along the [Malayan] peninsula, insects swarm in abundance; probably more varieties exist here than anywhere else on earth. There is some good hardwood timber, and camphor and ebony trees are found in profusion. Many orchid varieties thrive, some of extraordinary size." The book alluded to the area's "rich mixture of races and languages," its "extreme humidity" and "colorful native fauna," and

added: “Its jungles are so impenetrable that even the wild beasts must keep to well-worn paths.”

But perhaps the strangest aspect of this region was that, despite its dangers and discomforts, my companion claimed to have loved it. “They’ve got a mountain in the center of the peninsula—” He mentioned an unpronounceable name and shook his head. “Most beautiful thing you ever saw. And there’s some really pretty country down along the coast, you’d swear it was some kind of South Sea island. Comfortable, too. Oh, it’s damp all right, especially in the interior where the new mission was supposed to be—but the temperature never even hits a hundred. Try saying that for New York City.”

I nodded. “Remarkable.”

“And the people,” he went on, “why, I believe they’re just the friendliest people on earth. You know, I’d heard a lot of bad things about the Moslems —that’s what most of them are, part of the Sunni sect—but I’m telling you, they treated us with real neighborliness ... just so long as we made the teachings available, so to speak, and didn’t interfere with their affairs. And we didn’t. We didn’t have to. What we provided, you see, was a hospital—well, a clinic, at least, two RNs and a doctor who came twice a month—and a small library with books and films. And not just theology, either. All subjects. We were right outside the village, they’d have to pass us on their way to the river, and when they thought none of the *lontoks* were looking they’d just come in and look around.”

“None of the what?”

“Priests, sort of. There were a lot of them. But they didn’t interfere with us, we didn’t interfere with them. I don’t know that we made all that many converts, actually, but I’ve got nothing bad to say about those people.”

He paused, rubbing his eyes; he suddenly looked his age. “Things were going fine,” he said. “And then they told me to establish a second mission, further in the interior.”

He stopped once more, as if weighing whether to continue. A squat little Chinese woman was plodding slowly up the aisle, holding on to the chairs on each side for balance. I felt her hand brush past my ear as she went by. My companion watched her with a certain unease, waiting till she'd passed. When he spoke again his voice had thickened noticeably.

"I've been all over the world—a lot of places Americans can't even go to these days—and I've always felt that, wherever I was, God was surely watching. But once I started getting up into those hills, well..." He shook his head. "I was pretty much on my own, you see. They were going to send most of the staff out later, after I'd got set up. All I had with me was one of our grounds keepers, two bearers, and a guide who doubled as interpreter. Locals, all of them." He frowned. "The grounds keeper, at least, was a Christian."

"You needed an interpreter?"

The question seemed to distract him. "For the new mission, yes. My Malay stood me well enough in the lowlands, but in the interior they used dozens of local dialects. I would have been lost up there.

Where I was going they spoke something which our people back in the village called *agon di-gatuan*—'the Old Language.' I never really got to understand much of it." He stared down at his hands. "I wasn't there long enough."

"Trouble with the natives, I suppose."

He didn't answer right away. Finally he nodded. "I truly believe they must be the nastiest people who ever lived," he said with great deliberation. "I sometimes wonder how God could have created them." He stared out the window, at the hills of cloud below us. "They called themselves the Chauchas, near as I could make out. Some French colonial influence, maybe, but they looked Asiatic to me, with just a touch of black. Little people. Harmless looking." He gave a small shudder. "But they were nothing like what they seemed. You couldn't get to the bottom of them. They'd been living way up in those hills I don't know how many centuries, and whatever it is they were doing, they weren't going to let a stranger in on

it. They called themselves Moslems, just like the lowlanders, but I'm sure there must have been a few bush-gods mixed in. I thought they were primitive, at first. I mean, some of their rituals— you wouldn't believe it. But now I think they weren't primitive at all. They just kept those rituals because they enjoyed them!" He tried to smile; it just accentuated the lines in his face.

"Oh, they seemed friendly enough in the beginning," he said. "You could approach them, do a bit of trading, watch them breed their animals. You could even talk to them about Salvation. And they'd just keep smiling, smiling all the time. As if they really *liked* you."

I could hear the disappointment in his voice, and something else.

"You know," he confided, suddenly leaning closer, "down in the lowlands, in the pastures, there's an animal, a kind of snail, the Malays kill on sight. A little yellow thing, but it scares them silly: they believe that if it passes over the shadow of their cattle, it'll suck out the cattle's life-force. They used to call it a 'Chaucha snail.' Now I know why."

"Why?" I asked.

He looked around the plane, and seemed to sigh. "You understand, at this stage we were still living in tents. We had yet to build anything. Well, the weather got bad, the mosquitoes got worse, and after the grounds keeper disappeared the others took off. I think the guide persuaded them to go. Of course, this left me—"

"Wait. You say your grounds keeper disappeared?"

"Yes, before the first week was out. It was late afternoon. We'd been pacing out one of the fields less than a hundred yards from the tents, and I was pushing through the long grass thinking he was behind me, and I turned around and he wasn't."

He was speaking all in a rush now. I had visions out of 1940s movies, frightened natives sneaking off with the supplies, and I wondered how much of this was true.

“So with the others gone, too,” he said, “I had no way of communicating with the Chauchas, except through a kind of pidgin language, a mixture of Malay and their tongue. But I knew what was going on. All that week they kept laughing about something. Openly. And I got the impression that they were somehow responsible. I mean, for the man’s disappearance. You understand? He’d been the one I trusted.” His expression was pained. “A week later, when they showed him to me, he was still alive. But he couldn’t speak. I think they wanted it that way. You see, they’d— they’d grown something in him.” He shuddered.

Just at that moment, from directly behind us came an inhumanly high-pitched caterwauling that pierced the air like a siren, rising above the whine of the engines. It came with heart-stopping suddenness, and we both went rigid. I saw my companion’s mouth gape as if to echo the scream. So much for the past; we’d become two old men gone all white and clutching at themselves. It was really quite comical. A full minute must have passed before I could bring myself to turn around.

By this time the stewardess had arrived and was dabbing at the place where the man behind me, dozing, had dropped his cigarette on his lap. The surrounding passengers, whites especially, were casting angry glances at him, and I thought I smelled burnt flesh. He was at last helped to his feet by the stewardess and one of his teammates, the latter chuckling uneasily.

Minor as it was, the accident had derailed our conversation and unnerved my companion; it was as if he’d retreated into his beard. He would talk no further, except to ask me ordinary and rather trivial questions about food prices and accommodations. He said he was bound for Florida, looking forward to a summer of, as he put it, “R and R,” apparently financed by his sect. I asked him, a bit forlornly, what had happened in the end to the grounds keeper; he said that he had died. Drinks were served; the North American continent swung toward us from the south, first a finger of ice, soon a jagged line of green. I found myself giving the man my sister’s address—Indian Creek was just outside Miami, where he’d be staying—and immediately regretted doing so. What did I know of him, after all? He told me his name was Ambrose Mortimer. “It means ‘Dead Sea,’” he said. “From the Crusades.”

When I persisted in bringing up the subject of the mission, he waved me off. “I can’t call myself a missionary anymore,” he said. “Yesterday, when I left the country, I gave up that right.” He attempted a smile. “Honest, I’m just a civilian now.”

“What makes you think they’re after you?” I asked.

The smile vanished. “I’m not so sure they are,” he said, not very convincingly. “I may just be getting paranoid in my old age. But I could swear that in New Delhi, and again at Heathrow, I heard someone singing—singing a certain song. Once it was in the men’s room, on the other side of a partition; once it was behind me on line. And it was a song I recognized. It’s in the Old Language.” He shrugged. “I don’t even know what the words mean.”

“Why would anyone be singing? I mean, if they were following you?”

“That’s just it. I don’t know.” He shook his head. “But I think—I think it’s part of the ritual.”

“What sort of ritual?”

“I don’t know,” he said again. He looked quite pained, and I resolved to bring this inquisition to an end. The ventilators had not yet dissipated the smell of charred cloth and flesh.

“But you’d heard the song before,” I said. “You told me you recognized it.”

“Yeah.” He turned away and stared at the approaching clouds. We were passing over Maine. Suddenly the earth seemed a very small place. “I’d heard some of the Chaucha women singing it,” he said at last. “It was a sort of farming song. It’s supposed to make things grow.”

Ahead of us loomed the saffron yellow smog that covers Manhattan like a dome. The “No Smoking” light winked silently on the console above us.

“I was hoping I wouldn’t have to change planes,” my companion said presently. “But the Miami flight doesn’t leave for an hour and a half. I guess

I'll get off and walk around a bit, stretch my legs. I wonder how long customs 'll take." He seemed to be talking more to himself than to me. Once more I regretted my impulsiveness in giving him Maude's address. I was half tempted to make up some contagious disease for her, or a jealous husband. But then, quite likely he'd never call on her anyway; he hadn't even bothered to write down the name. And if he did pay a call—well, I told myself, perhaps he'd unwind when he realized he was safe among friends. He might even turn out to be good company; after all, he and my sister were practically the same age.

As the plane gave up the struggle and sank deeper into the warm encircling air, passengers shut books and magazines, organized their belongings, made last hurried forays to the bathroom to pat cold water on their faces. I wiped my spectacles and smoothed back what remained of my hair. My companion was staring out the window, the green Air Malay bag in his lap, his hands folded on it as if in prayer. We were already becoming strangers.

"Please return seat backs to the upright position," ordered a disembodied voice. Out beyond the window, past the head now turned completely away from me, the ground rose to meet us and we bumped along the pavement, jets roaring in reverse. Already stewardesses were rushing up and down the aisles pulling coats and jackets from the overhead bins; executive types, ignoring instructions, were scrambling to their feet and thrashing into raincoats. Outside I could see uniformed figures moving back and forth in what promised to be a warm grey drizzle. "Well," I said lamely, "we made it." I got to my feet.

He turned and flashed me a sickly grin. "Good-bye," he said. "This really has been a pleasure." He reached for my hand.

"And do try to relax and enjoy yourself in Miami," I said, looking for a break in the crowd that shuffled past me down the aisle. "That's the important thing—just to relax."

"I know that." He nodded gravely. "I know that. God bless you."

I found my slot and slipped into line. From behind me he added, "And I won't forget to look up your sister." My heart sank, but as I moved toward

the door I turned to shout a last farewell. The old lady with the eyes was two people in front of me, but she didn't so much as smile.

One trouble with last farewells is that they occasionally prove redundant. Some forty minutes later, having passed like a morsel of food through a series of white plastic tubes, corridors, and customs lines, I found myself in one of the airport gift shops, whiling away the hour till my niece came to collect me; and there, once again, I saw the missionary.

He did not see me. He was standing before one of the racks of paperbacks —the so-called "Classics" section, haunt of the public domain—and with a preoccupied air he was glancing up and down the rows, barely pausing long enough to read the titles. Like me, he was obviously just killing time.

For some reason—call it embarrassment, a certain reluctance to spoil what had been a successful good-bye—I refrained from hailing him. Instead, stepping back into the rear aisle, I took refuge behind a rack of gothics, which I pretended to study while in fact studying him.

Moments later he looked up from the books and ambled over to a bin of cellophane-wrapped records, idly pressing the beard back into place below his right sideburn. Without warning he turned and surveyed the store; I ducked my head toward the gothics and enjoyed a vision normally reserved for the multifaceted eyes of an insect: women, dozens of them, fleeing an equal number of tiny mansions.

At last, with a shrug of his huge shoulders, he began flipping through the albums in the bin, snapping each one forward in an impatient staccato. Soon, the assortment scanned, he moved to the bin on the left and started on that.

Suddenly he gave a little cry, and I saw him shrink back. He stood immobile for a moment, staring down at something in the bin; then he whirled and walked quickly from the store, pushing past a family about to enter.

"Late for his plane," I said to the astonished salesgirl, and strolled over to the albums. One of them lay faceup in the pile—a jazz record featuring

John Coltrane on saxophone. Confused, I turned to look for my erstwhile companion, but he had vanished in the crowd hurrying past the doorway.

Something about the album had apparently set him off; I studied it more carefully. Coltrane stood silhouetted against a tropical sunset, his features obscured, head tilted back, saxophone blaring silently beneath the crimson sky. The pose was dramatic but trite, and I could see in it no special significance: it looked like any other black man with a horn.

***

New York eclipses all other cities in the spontaneous cordiality and generosity of its inhabitants—at least, such inhabitants as I have encountered.

—Lovecraft, 9/29/1922

How quickly you changed your mind! You arrived to find a gold Dunsanian city of arches and domes and fantastic spires... or so you told us. Yet when you fled two years later you could see only “alien hordes.”

What was it that so spoiled the dream? Was it that impossible marriage? Those foreign faces on the subway? Or was it merely the theft of your new summer suit? I believed then, Howard, and I believe it still, that the nightmare was all your own; though you returned to New England like a man reemerging into sunlight, there was, I assure you, a very good life to be found amid the shade. I remained—and survived.

I almost wish I were back there now, instead of in this ugly little bungalow, with its air conditioner and its rotting wicker furniture and the humid night dripping down its windows.

I almost wish I were back on the steps of the natural history museum where, that momentous August afternoon, I stood perspiring in the shadow of Teddy Roosevelt’s horse, watching matrons stroll past Central Park with dogs or children in tow and fanning myself ineffectually with the postcard I’d just received from Maude. I was waiting for my niece to drive by and leave off her son, whom I planned to take round the museum; he’d wanted

to see the life-size mockup of the blue whale and, just upstairs, the dinosaurs...

I remember that Ellen and her boy were more than twenty minutes late. I remember too, Howard, that I was thinking of you that afternoon, and with some amusement: much as you disliked New York in the twenties, you'd have reeled in horror at what it's become today. Even from the steps of the museum I could see a curb piled high with refuse and a park whose length you might have walked without once hearing English spoken; dark skins crowded out the white, and mambo music echoed from across the street.

I remember all these things because, as it turned out, this was a special day: the day I saw, for the second time, the black man and his baleful horn.

My niece arrived late, as usual; she had for me the usual apology and the usual argument. "How can you still live over here?" she asked, depositing Terry on the sidewalk. "I mean, just look at those people." She nodded toward a park bench around which blacks and Latins congregated like figures in a group portrait.

"Brooklyn is so much better?" I countered, as tradition dictated.

"Of course," she said. "In the Heights, anyway. I don't understand it—why this pathological hatred of moving? You might at least try the East Side. You can certainly afford it." Terry watched us impassively, lounging against the fender. I think he sided with me over his mother, but he was too wise to show it.

"Ellen," I said, "let's face it. I'm just too old to start hanging around singles bars. Over on the East Side they read nothing but best-sellers, and they hate anyone past sixty. I'm better off where I grew up—at least I know where the cheap restaurants are." It was, in fact, a thorny problem: forced to choose between whites whom I despised and blacks whom I feared, I somehow preferred the fear.

To mollify Ellen I read aloud her mother's postcard. It was the prestamped kind that bore no picture. "I'm still getting used to the cane," Maude had written, her penmanship as flawless as when she'd won the school

medallion. “Livia has gone back to Vermont for the summer, so the card games are suspended & I’m hard into Pearl Buck. Your friend Rev. Mortimer dropped by & we had a nice chat. What amusing stories! Thanks again for the subscription to McCall’s; I’ll send Ellen my old copies. Look forward to seeing you all after the hurricane season.”

Terry was eager to confront the dinosaurs; he was, in fact, getting a little old for me to superintend, and was halfway up the steps before I’d arranged with Ellen where to meet us afterward. With school out the museum was almost as crowded as on weekends, the halls’ echo turning shouts and laughter into animal cries. We oriented ourselves on the floor plan in the main lobby— you are here read a large green dot, below which someone had scrawled “Too bad for you”—and trooped toward the Hall of Reptiles, Terry impatiently leading the way. “I saw that in school.” He pointed toward a redwood diorama. “That too”—the Grand Canyon. He was, I believe, about to enter seventh grade, and until now had been little given to talk; he looked younger than the other children.

We passed toucans and marmosets and the new Urban Ecology wing (“concrete and cockroaches,” sneered Terry), and duly stood before the brontosaurus, something of a disappointment: “I forgot it was just the skeleton,” he said. Behind us a group of black boys giggled and moved toward us; I hurried my nephew past the assembled bones and through the most crowded doorway, dedicated, ironically, to Man in Africa. “This is the boring part,” said Terry, unmoved by masks and spears. The pace was beginning to tire me. We passed through another doorway—Man in Asia—and moved quickly past the Chinese statuary. “I saw that in school.” He nodded at a stumpy figure in a glass case, wrapped in ceremonial robes. Something about it was familiar to me, too; I paused to stare at it. The outer robe, slightly tattered, was spun of some shiny green material and displayed tall, twisted-looking trees on one side, a kind of stylized river on the other. Across the front ran five yellow-brown shapes in loincloth and headdress, presumably fleeing toward the robe’s frayed edges; behind them stood a larger one, all black. In its mouth was a pendulous horn. The figure was crudely woven—little more than a stick figure, in fact—but it bore an unsettling resemblance, in both pose and proportion, to the one on the album cover.

Terry returned to my side, curious to see what I'd found. "Tribal garment," he read, peering at the white plastic notice below the case. "Malay Peninsula, Federation of Malaysia, early nineteenth century." He fell silent.

"Is that all it says?"

"Yep. They don't even have which tribe it's from." He reflected a moment. "Not that I really care."

"Well, I do," I said. "I wonder who'd know."

Obviously I'd have to seek advice at the information counter in the main lobby downstairs. Terry ran on ahead, while I followed even more slowly than before; the thought of a mystery evidently appealed to him, even one so tenuous and unexciting as this.

A bored-looking young college girl listened to the beginning of my query and handed me a pamphlet from below the counter. "You can't see anyone till September," she said, already beginning to turn away. "They're all on vacation."

I squinted at the tiny print on the first page: "Asia, our largest continent, has justly been called the cradle of civilization, but it may also be a birthplace of man himself." Obviously the pamphlet had been written before the current campaigns against sexism. I checked the date on the back: "Winter 1958." This would be of no help. Yet on page four my eye fell on the reference I sought:

...The model next to it wears a green silk ceremonial robe from Negri Sembilan, most rugged of the Malayan provinces. Note central motif of native man blowing ceremonial horn, and the graceful curve of his instrument; the figure is believed to be a representation of "Death's Herald," possibly warning villagers of approaching calamity. Gift of an anonymous donor, the robe is probably Tcho-tcho in origin, and dates from the early 19th century.

"What's the matter, uncle? Are you sick?" Terry gripped my shoulder and stared up at me, looking worried; my behavior had obviously confirmed his

worst fears about old people. “What’s it say in there?”

I gave him the pamphlet and staggered to a bench near the wall. I wanted time to think. The Tcho-Tcho People, I knew, had figured in a number of tales by Lovecraft and his disciples—Howard himself had called them “the wholly abominable Tcho-Tchos”—but I couldn’t remember much about them except that they were said to worship one of his imaginary deities. For some reason I associated them with Burma...

But whatever their attributes, I’d been certain of one thing: the Tcho-Tchos were completely fictitious.

Obviously I’d been wrong. Barring the unlikely possibility that the pamphlet itself was a hoax, I was forced to conclude that the malign beings of the stories were in fact based upon an actual race inhabiting the Southeast Asian subcontinent—a race whose name the missionary had mistranslated as “the Chauchas.”

It was a rather troublesome discovery. I had hoped to turn some of Mortimer’s recollections, authentic or not, into fiction; he’d unwittingly given me the material for three or four good plots. Yet I’d now discovered that my friend Howard had beaten me to it, and that I was put in the uncomfortable position of living out another man’s horror stories.

***

Epistolary expression is with me largely replacing conversation.

—Lovecraft, 12/23/1917

I hadn’t expected my second encounter with the black horn-player. A month later I got an even bigger surprise: I saw the missionary again.

Or at any rate, his picture. It was in a clipping my sister had sent me from the Miami Herald, over which she had written in ballpoint pen, “Just saw this in the paper—how awful!!”

I didn't recognize the face; the photo was obviously an old one, the reproduction poor, and the man was clean-shaven. But the words below it told me it was him.

CLERGYMAN MISSING IN STORM

(Wed.) The Rev. Ambrose B. Mortimer, 56, a lay pastor of the Church of Christ, Knoxville, Tenn., has been reported missing in the wake of Monday's hurricane. Spokesmen for the order say Mortimer had recently retired after serving nineteen years as a missionary, most recently in Malaysia. After moving to Miami in July, he had been a resident of 311 Pompano Canal Road.

Here the piece ended, with an abruptness that seemed all too appropriate to its subject. Whether Ambrose Mortimer still lived I didn't know, but I felt certain now that, having fled one peninsula, he had strayed onto another just as dangerous, a finger thrust into the void. And the void had swallowed him up.

So, anyway, ran my thoughts. I have often been prey to depressions of a similar nature, and subscribe to a fatalistic philosophy I'd shared with my friend Howard: a philosophy one of his less sympathetic biographers has dubbed "futilitarianism."

Yet pessimistic as I was, I was not about to let the matter rest. Mortimer may well have been lost in the storm; he may even have set off somewhere on his own. But if, in fact, some lunatic religious sect had done away with him for having pried too closely into its affairs, there were things I could do about it. I wrote to the Miami police that very day.

"Gentlemen," I began. "Having learned of the recent disappearance of the Reverend Ambrose Mortimer, I think I can provide information which may prove of use to investigators."

There is no need to quote the rest of the letter here. Suffice it to say that I recounted my conversation with the missing man, emphasizing the fears he'd expressed for his life: pursuit and "ritual murder" at the hands of a Malayan tribe called the Tcho-Tcho. The letter was, in short, a rather

elaborate way of crying “foul play.” I sent it care of my sister, asking that she forward it to the correct address.

The police department’s reply came with unexpected speed. As with all such correspondence, it was more curt than courteous. “Dear Sir,” wrote a Detective Sergeant A. Linahan; “In the matter of Rev. Mortimer we had already been apprised of the threats on his life. To date a preliminary search of the Pompano Canal has produced no findings, but dredging operations are expected to continue as part of our routine investigation. Thanking you for your concern—”

Below his signature, however, the sergeant had added a short postscript in his own hand. Its tone was somewhat more personal; perhaps typewriters intimidated him. “You may be interested to know,” it said, “that we’ve recently learned a man carrying a Malaysian passport occupied rooms at a North Miami hotel for most of the summer, but checked out two weeks before your friend disappeared. I’m not at liberty to say more, but please be assured we are tracking down several leads at the moment. Our investigators are working full-time on the matter, and we hope to bring it to a speedy conclusion.”

Linahan’s letter arrived on September twenty-first. Before the week was out I had one from my sister, along with another clipping from the Herald; and since, like some old Victorian novel, this chapter seems to have taken an epistolary form, I will end it with extracts from these two items.

The newspaper story was headed wanted for questioning. Like the Mortimer piece, it was little more than a photo with an extended caption:

Thurs.) A Malaysian citizen is being sought for questioning in connection with the disappearance of an American clergyman, Miami police say. Records indicate that the Malaysian, Mr. D. A. Djaktu-tchow, had occupied furnished rooms at the Barkleigh Hotella, 2401 Culebra Ave., possibly with an unnamed companion. He is believed still in the greater Miami area, but since August 22 his movements cannot be traced. State Dept, officials report Djaktu-tchow’s visa expired August 31; charges are pending.

The clergyman, Rev. Ambrose B. Mortimer, has been missing since September 6.

The photo above the article was evidently a recent one, no doubt reproduced from the visa in question. I recognized the smiling moon-wide face, although it took me a moment to place him as the man whose dinner I'd stumbled over on the plane. Without the moustache, he looked less like Charlie Chan.

The accompanying letter filled in a few details. "I called up the Herald," my sister wrote, "but they couldn't tell me any more than was in the article. Just the same, finding that out took me half an hour, since the stupid woman at the switchboard kept putting me through to the wrong person. I guess you're right—anything that prints color pictures on page one shouldn't call itself a newspaper.

"This afternoon I called up the police department, but they weren't very helpful either. I suppose you just can't expect to find out much over the phone, though I still rely on it. Finally I got an Officer Linahan, who told me he's just replied to that letter of yours. Have you heard from him yet? The man was very evasive. He was trying to be nice, but I could tell he was impatient to get off. He did give me the full name of the man they're looking for— Djaktu Abdul Djaktu-tchow, isn't that marvelous?—and he told me they have some more material on him which they can't release right now. I argued and pleaded (you know how persuasive I can be!) and finally, because I claimed I'd been a close friend of Rev. Mortimer's, I wheedled something out of him which he swore he'd deny if I told anyone but you. Apparently the poor man must have been deathly ill, maybe even tubercular —I intended to get a patch test next week, just to play safe, and I recommend that you get one too—because it seems that, in the reverend's bedroom, they found something very odd: pieces of lung tissue. Human lung tissue."

***

I, too, was a detective in youth.

—Lovecraft, 2/17/1931

Do amateur detectives still exist? I mean, outside the novels? I doubt it. Who, after all, has the time for such games today? Not I, unfortunately; though for more than a decade I'd been nominally retired, my days were quite full with the unromantic activities that occupy everyone this side of the paperbacks: letters, luncheon dates, visits to my niece and to my doctor; books (not enough) and television (too much) and perhaps a Golden Agers' matinee (though I have largely stopped going to films, finding myself increasingly out of sympathy with their heroes). I also spent Halloween week in Atlantic City, and most of another attempting to interest a rather overpolite young publisher in reprinting some of my early work.

All this, of course, is intended as a sort of apologia for my having put off further inquiries into poor Mortimer's case till mid- November. The truth is, the matter almost slipped my mind; only in novels do people not have better things to do.

It was Maude who reawakened my interest. She had been avidly scanning the papers—in vain—for further reports on the man's disappearance; I believe she had even phoned Sergeant Linahan a second time, but had learned nothing new. Now she wrote me with a tiny fragment of information, heard at thirdhand: one of her bridge partners had had it on the authority of "a friend in the police force" that the search for Mr. Djaktu was being widened to include his presumed companion—"a Negro child," or so my sister reported. Although there was every possibility that this information was false, or that it concerned an entirely different case, I could tell she regarded it as very sinister indeed.

Perhaps that was why the following afternoon found me struggling once more up the steps of the natural history museum—as much to satisfy Maude as myself. Her allusion to a Negro, coming after the curious discovery in Mortimer's bedroom, had recalled to mind the figure on the Malayan robe, and I had been troubled all night by the fantasy of a black man—a man much like the beggar I'd just seen huddled against Roosevelt's statue—coughing his lungs out into a sort of twisted horn.

I had encountered few other people on the streets that afternoon, as it was unseasonably cold for a city that's often mild till January; I wore a muffler, and my grey tweed overcoat flapped round my heels. Inside, however, the

place like all American buildings was overheated; I was soon the same as I made my way up the demoralizingly long staircase to the second floor.

The corridors were silent and empty, but for the morose figure of a guard seated before one of the alcoves, head down as if in mourning, and, from above me, the hiss of the steam radiators near the marble ceiling. Slowly, and rather enjoying the sense of privilege that comes from having a museum to oneself, I retraced my earlier route past the immense skeletons of dinosaurs ("These great creatures once trod the earth where you now walk") and down to the Hall of Primitive Man, where two Puerto Rican youths, obviously playing hooky, stood by the African wing gazing worshipfully at a Masai warrior in full battle gear. In the section devoted to Asia I paused to get my bearings, looking in vain for the squat figure in the robe. The glass case was empty. Over its plaque was taped a printed notice: "Temporarily removed for restoration."

This was no doubt the first time in forty years that the display had been taken down, and of course I'd picked just this occasion to look for it. So much for luck. I headed for the nearest staircase, at the far end of the wing. From behind me the clank of metal echoed down the hall, followed by the angry voice of the guard. Perhaps that Masai spear had proved too great a temptation.

In the main lobby I was issued a written pass to enter the north wing, where the staff offices were located. "You want the workrooms on basement level," said the woman at the information counter; the summer's bored coed had become a friendly old lady who eyed me with some interest. "Just ask the guard at the bottom of the stairs, past the cafeteria. I do hope you find what you're looking for."

Carefully keeping the pink slip she'd handed me visible for anyone who might demand it, I descended. As I turned onto the stairwell I was confronted with a kind of vision: a blonde, Scandinavian-looking family were coming up the stairs toward me, the four upturned faces almost interchangeable, parents and two little girls with the pursed lips and timidly hopeful eyes of the tourist, while just behind them, apparently unheard, capered a grinning black youth, practically walking on the father's heels. In my present state of mind the scene appeared particularly disturbing—the

boy's expression was certainly one of mockery—and I wondered if the guard who stood before the cafeteria had noticed. If he had, however, he gave no sign; he glanced without curiosity at my pass and pointed toward a fire door at the end of the hall.

The offices in the lower level were surprisingly shabby—the walls here were not marble but faded green plaster—and the entire corridor had a "buried" feeling to it, no doubt because the only outside light came from ground-level window gratings high overhead. I had been told to ask for one of the research associates, a Mr. Richmond; his office was part of a suite broken up by pegboard dividers. The door was open, and he got up from his desk as soon as I entered; I suspect that, in view of my age and grey tweed overcoat, he may have taken me for someone important.

A plump young man with sandy-colored beard, he looked like an out-of-shape surfer, but his sunniness dissolved when I mentioned my interest in the green silk robe. "And I suppose you're the man who complained about it upstairs, am I right?"

I assured him that I was not.

"Well, someone sure did," he said, still eyeing me resentfully; on the wall behind him an Indian war-mask did the same. "Some damn tourist, maybe, in town for a day and out to make trouble. Threatened to call the Malaysian Embassy. If you put up a fuss those people upstairs get scared it'll wind up in the Times."

I understood his allusion; the previous year the museum had gained considerable notoriety for having conducted some really appalling—and, to my mind, quite pointless—experiments on cats. Most of the public had, until then, been unaware that the building housed several working laboratories.

"Anyway," he continued, "the robe's down in the shop, and we're stuck with patching up the damn thing. It'll probably be down there for the next six months before we get to it. We're so understaffed right now it isn't funny." He glanced at his watch. "Come on, I'll show you. Then I've got to go upstairs."

I followed him down a narrow corridor that branched off to either side. At one point he said, “On your right, the infamous zoology lab.” I kept my eyes straight ahead. As we passed the next doorway I smelled a familiar odor. “It makes me think of treacle,” I said.

“You’re not so far wrong.” He spoke without looking back. “The stuffs mostly molasses. Pure nutrient. They use it for growing microorganisms.”

I hurried to keep up with him. “And for other things?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know, mister. It’s not my field.”

We came to a door barred by a black wire grille. “Here’s one of the shops,” he said, fitting a key into the lock. The door swung open on a long unlit room smelling of wood shavings and glue. “You sit down over here,” he said, leading me to a small anteroom and switching on the light. “I’ll be back in a second.” I stared at the object closest to me, a large ebony chest, ornately carved. Its hinges had been removed. Richmond returned with the robe draped over his arm. “See?” he said, dangling it before me. “It’s really not in such bad condition, is it?” I realized he still thought of me as the man who’d complained.

On the field of rippling green fled the small brown shapes, still pursued by some unseen doom. In the center stood the black man, black horn to his lips, man and horn a single line of unbroken black.

“Are the Tcho-Tchos a superstitious people?” I asked.

“They were," he said pointedly. “Superstitious and not very pleasant. They’re extinct as dinosaurs now. Supposedly wiped out by the Japanese or something.”

“That’s rather odd,” I said. “A friend of mine claims to have met up with them earlier this year.”

Richmond was smoothing out the robe; the branches of the snake-trees snapped futilely at the brown shapes. “I suppose it’s possible,” he said, after a pause. “But I haven’t read anything about them since grad school. They’re

certainly not listed in the textbooks anymore. I've looked, and there's nothing on them. This robe's over a hundred years old."

I pointed to the figure in the center. "What can you tell me about this fellow?"

"Death's Herald," he said, as if it were a quiz. "At least that's what the literature says. Supposed to warn of some approaching calamity."

I nodded without looking up; he was merely repeating what I'd read in the pamphlet. "But isn't it strange," I said, "that these others are in such a panic? See? They aren't even waiting around to listen." "Would you?" He snorted impatiently.

"But if the black one's just a messenger of some sort, why's he so much bigger than the others?"

Richmond began folding the cloth. "Look, mister," he said, "I don't pretend to be an expert on every tribe in Asia. But if a character's important, they'd sometimes make him larger. Anyway, that's what the Mayans did. But listen, I've really got to get this put away now. I've got a meeting to go to."

While he was gone I sat thinking about what I'd just seen. The small brown shapes, crude as they were, had expressed a terror no mere messenger could inspire. And that great black figure standing triumphant in the center, horn twisting from its mouth—that was no messenger either, I was sure of it. That was no Death's Herald. That was Death itself.

I returned to my apartment just in time to hear the telephone ringing, but by the time I'd let myself in it had stopped. I sat down in the living room with a mug of coffee and a book which had lain untouched on the shelf for the last thirty years: Jungle Ways, by that old humbug, William Seabrook. I'd met him back in the twenties and had found him likable enough, if rather untrustworthy. His book described dozens of unlikely characters, including "a cannibal chief who had got himself jailed and famous because he had eaten his young wife, a handsome, lazy wench called Blito, along with a dozen of her girl friends," but I discovered no mention of a black horn-player.

I had just finished my coffee when the phone rang again. It was my sister.

“I just wanted to let you know that there’s another man missing,” she said breathlessly; I couldn’t tell if she was frightened or merely excited. “A busboy at the San Marino. Remember? I took you there.”

The San Marino was an inexpensive little luncheonette on Indian Creek, several blocks from my sister’s house. She and her friends ate there several times a week.

“It happened last night,” she went on. “I just heard about it at my card game. They say he went outside with a bucket of fish heads to dump in the creek, and he never came back.”

“That’s very interesting, but...” I thought for a moment; it was highly unusual for her to call me like this. “But really, Maude, couldn’t he have simply run off? I mean, what makes you think there’s any connection—”

“Because I took Ambrose there, too!” she cried. “Three or four times. That was where we used to meet.”

Apparently Maude had been considerably better acquainted with the Reverend Mortimer than her letters would have led one to believe. But I wasn’t interested in pursuing that line right now. “This busboy,” I asked, “was he someone you knew?”

“Of course,” she said. “I know everyone in there. His name was Carlos. A quiet boy, very courteous. I’m sure he must have waited on us dozens of times.”

I had seldom heard my sister so upset, but for the present there seemed no way of calming her fears. Before hanging up she made me promise to move up the month’s visit I’d expected to pay her over Christmas; 1 assured her I would try to make it down for

Thanksgiving, then only a week away, if 1 could find a flight that wasn’t filled.

“Do try,” she said—and, were this a tale from the old pulps, she would have added: “If anyone can get to the bottom of this, you can.” In truth, however, both Maude and I were aware that I had just celebrated my seventy-seventh birthday and that, of the two of us, I was by far the more timid; so that what.she actually said was, “Looking after you will help take my mind off things.”

***

I couldn’t live a week without a private library.

—Lovecraft, 2/25/1929

That’s what I thought, too, until recently. After a lifetime of collecting I’d acquired thousands upon thousands of volumes, never parting with a one; it was this cumbersome private library, in fact, that helped keep me anchored to the same West Side apartment for nearly half a century.

Yet here I sit, with no company save a few gardening manuals and a shelf of antiquated best-sellers—nothing to dream on, nothing I’d want to hold in my hand. Still, I’ve survived here a week, a month, almost a season. The truth is, Howard, you’d be surprised what you can live without. As for the books I’ve left in Manhattan, I just hope someone takes care of them when I’m gone.

But I was by no means so resigned that November when, having successfully reserved seats on an earlier flight, I found myself with less than a week in New York. I spent all my remaining time in the library—the public one on Forty-second Street, with the lions in front and with no book of mine on its shelves. Its two reading rooms were the haunt of men my age and older, retired men with days to fill, poor men just warming their bones; some leafed through newspapers, others dozed in their seats. None of them, I’m sure, shared my sense of urgency: there were things I hoped to find out before I left, things for which Miami would be useless.

I was no stranger to this building. Long ago, during one of Howard’s visits, I had undertaken some genealogical researches here in the hope of finding ancestors more impressive than his, and as a young man I had occasionally

attempted to support myself, like the denizens of Gissing's New Grub Street, by writing articles compiled from the work of others. But by now I was out of practice: how, after all, does one find references to an obscure Southeast Asian tribal myth without reading everything published on that part of the world?

Initially that's exactly what I tried; I looked through every book I could find with "Malaya" in its title. I read about rainbow gods and phallic altars and something called "the tatai," a sort of unwanted companion; I came across wedding rites and The Death of Thorns and a certain cave inhabited by millions of snails. But I' found no mention of the Tcho-Tcho, and nothing on their gods.

This in itself was surprising. We are living in a day when there are no more secrets, when my twelve-year-old nephew can buy his own grimoire and books with titles like The Encyclopaedia of Ancient and Forbidden Knowledge are remaindered at every discount store. Though my friends from the twenties would have hated to admit it, the notion of stumbling across some moldering old "black book" in the attic of a deserted house—some lexicon of spells and chants and hidden lore—is merely a quaint fantasy. If the *Necronomicon* actually existed, it would be out in Bantam paperback with a preface by Lin Carter.

It's appropriate, then, that when I finally came upon a reference to what I sought, it was in that most unromantic of forms, a mimeographed film-script.

"Transcript" would perhaps be closer to the truth, for it was based upon a film shot in 1937 and that was now presumably crumbling in some forgotten vault. I discovered the item inside one of those brown cardboard packets, held together with ribbons, which libraries use to protect books whose bindings have worn away. The book itself, *Malay Memories*, by a Reverend Morton, had proved a disappointment despite the author's rather suggestive name. The transcript lay beneath it, apparently slipped there by mistake, but though it appeared unpromising—only ninety-six pages long, badly typed, and held together by a single rusty staple—it more than repaid the reading. There was no title page, nor do I think there'd ever been one; the first page simply identified the film as "Documentary—Malaya Today,"

and noted that it had been financed, in part, by a U.S. government grant. The filmmaker or makers were not listed.

I soon saw why the government may have been willing to lend the venture some support, for there were a great many scenes in which the proprietors of rubber plantations expressed the sort of opinions Americans might want to hear. To an unidentified interviewer's query, "What other signs of prosperity do you see around you?" a planter named Mr. Pierce had obligingly replied, "Why, look at the living standard—better schools for the natives and a new lorry for me. It's from Detroit, you know. May even have my own rubber in it."

INT: And how about the Japanese? Are they one of today's better markets?

PIERCE: Oh, see, they buy our crop al! right, but we don't really trust 'em, understand? (Smiles) We don't like 'em half so much as the Yanks.

The final section of the transcript was considerably more interesting, however; it recorded a number of brief scenes that must never have appeared in the finished film. I quote one of them in its entirety:

PLAYROOM, CHURCH SCHOOL—LATE AFTERNOON.

(DELETED)

INT: This Malay youth has sketched a picture of a demon he calls Shoo Goron. (To Boy) I wonder if you can tell me something about the instrument he's blowing out of. It looks like the Jewish shofar, or ram's horn. (Again to Boy) That's all right. No need to be frightened.

BOY: He no blow out. Blow in.

INT: I see—he draws air in through the horn, is that right?

BOY: No horn. Is no horn. (Weeps) Is him.

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Miami did not produce much of an impression...

—Lovecraft, 7/19/1931

Waiting in the airport lounge with Ellen and her boy, my bags already checked and my seat number assigned, I fell prey to the sort of anxiety that had made me miserable in youth: it was a sense that time was running out; and what caused it now, I think, was the hour that remained before my flight was due to leave. It was too long a time to sit making small talk with Terry, whose mind was patently on other things; yet it was too short to accomplish the task which I'd suddenly realized had been left undone.

But perhaps my nephew would serve. "Terry," I said, "how'd you like to do me a favor?" He looked up eagerly; I suppose children his age love to be of use. "Remember the building we passed on the way here? The International Arrivals building?"

"Sure," he said. "Right next door."

"Yes, but it's a lot farther away than it looks. Do you think you'd be able to get there and back in the next hour and find something out for me?"

"Sure." He was already out of his seat.

"It just occurs to me that there's an Air Malay reservations desk in that building, and I wonder if you could ask someone there—"

My niece interrupted me. "Oh, no he won't," she said firmly. "First of all, I won't have him running across that highway on some silly errand—" she ignored her son's protests, "—and secondly, I don't want him involved in this game you've got going with Mother."

The upshot of it was that Ellen went herself, leaving Terry and me to our small talk. She took with her a slip of paper upon which I'd written "Shoo Goron," a name she regarded with sour skepticism. I wasn't sure she would return before my departure (Terry, I could see, was growing increasingly uneasy), but she was back before the second boarding call.

"She says you spelled it wrong," Ellen announced.

“Who’s she?”

“Just one of the flight attendants,” said Ellen. “A young girl, in her early twenties. None of the others were Malayan. At first she didn’t recognize the name, until she read it out loud a few times. Apparently it’s some kind of fish, am I right? Like a suckerfish, only bigger. Anyway, that’s what she said. Her mother used to scare her with it when she was bad.”

Obviously Ellen—or, more likely, the other woman—had misunderstood. “Sort of a bogeyman figure?” I asked. “Well, I suppose that’s possible. But a fish, you say?”

Ellen nodded. “I don’t think she knew that much about it, though. She acted a little embarrassed, in fact. Like I’d asked her something dirty.” From across the room a loudspeaker issued the final call for passengers. Ellen helped me to my feet, still talking. “She said she was just a Malay, from somewhere on the coast— Malacca? I forget—and that it’s a shame I didn!t drop by three or four months ago, because her summer replacement was part Chocha—Chocho?—something like that.”

The line was growing shorter now. I wished the two of them a safe Thanksgiving and shuffled toward the plane.

Below me the clouds had formed a landscape of rolling hills. I could see every ridge, every washed-out shrub, and in the darker places, the eyes of animals.

Some of the valleys were split by jagged black lines that looked like rivers seen on a map. The water, at least, was real enough: here the cloudbank had cracked and parted, revealing the dark sea beneath.

Throughout the ride I’d been conscious of lost opportunity, a sense that my destination offered a kind of final chance. With Howard gone these forty years I still lived out my life in his shadow; certainly his tales had overshadowed my own. Now I found myself trapped within one of them. Here, miles above the earth, I felt great gods warring; below, the war was already lost.

The very passengers around me seemed participants in a masque: the oily little steward who smelled of something odd; the child who stared and wouldn't look away; the man asleep beside me, mouth slack, who'd chuckled and handed me a page ripped from his "inflight" magazine: November puzzle page, with an eye staring in astonishment from a swarm of dots. "Connect the dots and see what you'll be least thankful for this Thanksgiving!" Below it, half buried amid "B'nai B'rith to Host Song Fest" and advertisements for beach clubs, a bit of local color found me in a susceptible mood:

Have Fins, Will Travel

(Courtesy Miami Herald) If your hubby comes home and swears he's just seen a school of fish walk across the yard, don't sniff his breath for booze. He may be telling the truth! According to U. of Miami zoologists, catfish will be migrating in record numbers this fall and South Florida residents can expect to see hundreds of the whiskered critters crawling overland, miles from water. Though usually no bigger than your pussycat, most breeds can survive without...

Here the piece came to a ragged end where my companion had torn it from the magazine. He stirred in his sleep, lips moving; I turned and put my head against the window, where the limb of Florida was swinging into view, veined with dozens of canals. The plane shuddered and slid toward it.

Maude was already at the gate, a black porter beside her with an empty cart. While we waited by a hatchway in the basement for my luggage to be disgorged, she told me the sequel to the San Marino incident: the boy's body found washed up on a distant beach, lungs in mouth and throat. "Inside out," she said. "Can you imagine? It's been on the radio all morning. With tapes of some ghastly doctor talking about smoker's cough and the way people drown. I couldn't even listen after a while." The porter heaved my bags onto the cart and we followed him to the taxi stand, Maude using her cane to gesticulate. If I hadn't seen how aged she'd become I'd have thought the excitement was agreeing with her.

We had the driver make a detour westward along Pompano Canal Road, where we paused at number 311, one of nine shabby green cabins that

formed a court round a small and very dirty wading pool; in a cement pot beside the pool drooped a solitary half-dead palm, as if in some travesty of an oasis. This, then, had been Ambrose Mortimer's final home. My sister was very silent, and I believed her when she said she'd never been here before. Across the street glistened the oily waters of the canal.

The taxi turned east. We passed interminable rows of hotels, motels, condominiums, shopping centers as big as Central Park, souvenir shops with billboards bigger than themselves, baskets of seashells and wriggly plastic auto toys out front. Men and women our age and younger sat on canvas beach chairs in their yards, blinking at the traffic. The sexes had merged; some of the older women were nearly as bald as I was, and men wore clothes the color of coral, lime, and peach. They walked very slowly as they crossed the street or moved along the sidewalk; cars moved almost as slowly, and it was forty minutes before we reached Maude's house, with its pastel orange shutters and the retired druggist and his wife living upstairs. Here, too, a kind of languor was upon the block, one into which I knew, with just a memory of regret, I would soon be settling. Life was slowing to a halt, and once the taxi had roared away the only things that stirred were the geraniums in Maude's window box, trembling slightly in a breeze I couldn't even feel.

A dry spell. Mornings in my sister's air-conditioned parlor, luncheons with her friends in air-conditioned coffee shops. Inadvertent afternoon naps, from which I'd waken with headaches. Evening walks, to watch the sunsets, the fireflies, the TV screens flashing behind neighbors' blinds. By night, a few faint cloudy stars; by day, tiny lizards skittering over the hot pavement, or boldly sunning themselves on the flagstones. The smell of oil paints in my sister's closet, and the insistent buzz of mosquitoes in her garden. Her sundial, a gift from Ellen, with Terry's message painted on the rim. Lunch at the San Marino and a brief, halfhearted look at the dock in back, now something of a tourist attraction. An afternoon at a branch library in Hialeah, searching through its shelves of travel books, an old man dozing at the table across from me, a child laboriously copying her school report from the encyclopedia. Thanksgiving dinner, with its half-hour's phone call to Ellen and the boy and the prospect of turkey for the rest of the week. More friends to visit, and another day at the library.

Later, driven by boredom and the ghost of an impulse, I phoned the Barkleigh Hotella in North Miami and booked a room there for two nights. I don't remember the days I settled for, because that sort of thing no longer had much meaning, but I know it was for midweek; "we're deep in the season," the proprietress informed me, and the hotel would be filled each weekend till long past New Year's.

My sister refused to accompany me out to Culebra Avenue; she saw no attraction in visiting the place once occupied by a fugitive Malaysian, nor did she share my pulp-novel fantasy that, by actually living there myself, I might uncover some clue unknown to police. ("Thanks to the celebrated author of Beyond the Garve ...") I went alone, by cab, taking with me half a dozen volumes from the branch library. Beyond the reading, I had no other plans.

The Barkleigh was a pink adobe building two stories tall, surmounted by an ancient neon sign on which the dust lay thick in the early afternoon sunlight. Similar establishments lined the block on both sides, each more depressing than the last. There was no elevator here and, as I learned to my disappointment, no rooms available on the first floor; the staircase looked like it was going to be an effort.

In the office downstairs I inquired, as casually as I could, which room the notorious Mr. Djaktu had occupied; I'd hoped, in fact, to be assigned it, or one nearby. But I was doomed to disappointment. The preoccupied little Cuban behind the counter had been hired only six weeks before and claimed to know nothing of the matter; in halting English he explained that the proprietress, a Mrs. Zimmerman, had just left for New Jersey to visit relatives and would not be back till Christmas. Obviously I could forget about gossip.

By this point I was half tempted to cancel my visit, and I confess that what kept me there was not so much a sense of honor as the desire for two days' separation from Maude, who, having been on her own for nearly a decade, was rather difficult to live with.

I followed the Cuban upstairs, watching my suitcase bump rhythmically against his legs, and was led down the hall to a room facing the rear. The

place smelled vaguely of salt air and hair oil; the sagging bed had served many a desperate holiday. A small cement terrace overlooked the yard and a vacant lot behind it, the latter so overgrown with weeds and the grass in the yard so long unmown that it was difficult to tell where one began and the other ended. A clump of palms rose somewhere in the middle of this no-man's-land, impossibly tall and thin, with only a few stiffened leaves to grace the tops. On the ground below them lay several rotting coconuts.

This was my view the first night when I returned after dining at a nearby restaurant. I felt unusually tired and soon went inside to sleep. The night being cool, there was no need for the air conditioner; as I lay in the huge bed I could hear people stirring in the adjoining room, the hiss of a bus moving down the avenue, and the rustle of palm leaves in the wind.

I spent part of the next morning composing a letter to Mrs. Zimmerman, to be held for her return. After the long walk to a coffee shop for lunch, I napped. After dinner I did the same. With the TV turned on for company, a garrulous blur at the other side of the room, I went through the pile of books on my night-table, final cullings from the bottom of the travel shelf; most of them hadn't been taken out since the thirties. I found nothing of interest in any of them, at least upon first inspection, but before turning out the light I noticed that one, the reminiscences of a Colonel E. G. Paterson, was provided with an index. Though I looked in vain for the demon Shoo Goron, I found reference to it under a variant spelling.

The author, no doubt long deceased, had spent most of his life in the Orient. His interest in Southeast Asia was slight, and the passage in question consequently brief:

...Despite the richness and variety of their folklore, however, they have nothing akin to the Malay shugoran, a kind of bogey-man used to frighten naughty children. The traveller hears many conflicting descriptions of it, some bordering on the obscene. [Oran, of course, is Malay for 'man,' while shug, which here connotes 'sniffing' or 'questing,' means literally, 'elephant's trunk.') I well recall the hide which hung over the bar at the Traders' Club in Singapore, and which, according to tradition, represented the infant of this fabulous creature; its wings were black, like the skin of a Hottentot. Shortly after the War a regimental surgeon was passing through

on his way back to Gibraltar and, after due examination, pronounced it the dried-out skin of a rather large catfish. He was never asked back.

I kept my light on until I was ready to fall asleep, listening to the wind rattle the palm leaves and whine up and down the row of terraces. As I switched off the light I half expected to see a shadowy shape at the window, but I saw, as the poet says, nothing but the night.

The next morning I packed my bag and left, aware that my stay in the hotel had proved fruitless. I returned to my sister's house to find her in agitated conversation with the druggist from upstairs; she was in a terrible state and said she'd been trying to reach me all morning. She had awakened to find the flower box by her bedroom window overturned and the shrubbery beneath it trampled. Down the side of the house ran two immense slash marks several yards apart, starting at the roof and continuing straight to the ground.

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My gawd, how the years fly. Stolidly middle-aged—when only yesterday I was young and eager and awed by the mystery of an unfolding world.

—Lovecraft, 8/20/1926

There is little more to report. Here the tale degenerates into an unsifted collection of items which may or may not be related: pieces of a puzzle for those who fancy themselves puzzle fans, a random swarm of dots, and in the center, a wide unwinking eye.

Of course, my sister left the house on Indian Creek that very day and took rooms for herself in a downtown Miami hotel. Subsequently she moved inland to live with a friend in a green stucco bungalow several miles from the Everglades, third in a row of nine just off the main highway. I am seated in its den as I write this. After the friend died my sister lived on here alone, making the forty-mile bus trip to Miami only on special occasions: theater with a group of friends, one or two shopping trips a year. She had everything else she needed right here in town.

I returned to New York, caught a chill, and finished out the winter in a hospital bed, visited rather less often than I might have wished by my niece and her boy. Of course, the drive in from Brooklyn is nothing to scoff at.

One recovers far more slowly when one has reached my age; it's a painful truth we all learn if we live long enough. Howard's life was short, but in the end I think he understood. At thirty-five he could deride as madness a friend's "hankering after youth," yet ten years later he'd learned to mourn the loss of his own. "The years tell on one!" he'd written. "You young fellows don't know how lucky you are!"

Age is indeed the great mystery. How else could Terry have emblazoned his grandmother's sundial with that saccharine nonsense?

Grow old along with me;

The best is yet to be.

True, the motto is traditional to sundials—but that young fool hadn't even kept to the rhyme. With diabolical imprecision he had written, "The best is yet to come"—a line to make me gnash my teeth, if I had any left to gnash.

I spent most of the spring indoors, cooking myself wretched little meals and working ineffectually on a literary project that had occupied my thoughts. It was discouraging to find that I wrote so slowly now, and changed so much. My sister only reinforced the mood when, sending me a rather salacious story she'd found in the Enquirer—about the "thing like a vacuum cleaner" that snaked through a Swedish sailor's porthole and "made his face all purple"—she wrote at the top, "See? Right out of Lovecraft. "

It was not long after this that I received, to my surprise, a letter from Mrs. Zimmerman, bearing profuse apologies for having misplaced my inquiry until it turned up again during "spring cleaning." (It is hard to imagine any sort of cleaning at the Barkleigh Hotella, spring or otherwise, but even this late reply was welcome.) "I am sorry that the minister who disappeared was a friend of yours," she wrote. "I'm sure he must have been a fine gentleman.

“You asked me for ‘the particulars,’ but from your note you seem to know the whole story. There is really nothing I can tell you that I did not tell the police, though I do not think they ever released all of it to the papers. Our records show that our guest Mr. Djaktu arrived here nearly a year ago, at the end of June, and left the last week of August owing me a week’s rent plus various damages which I no longer have much hope of recovering, though I have written the Malaysian Embassy about it.

“In other respects he was a proper boarder, paid regularly, and in fact hardly ever left his room except to walk in the back yard from time to time, or stop at the grocer’s. (We have found it impossible to discourage eating in rooms.) My only complaint is that in the middle of the summer he may have had a small colored child living with him without our knowledge, until one of the maids heard him singing to it as she passed his room. She did not recognize the language, but said she thought it might be Hebrew. (The poor woman, now sadly taken from us, was barely able to read.) When she next made up the room, she told me that Mr. Djaktu claimed the child was ‘his,’ and that she left because she caught a glimpse of it watching her from the bathroom. She said it was naked. I did not speak of this at the time, as I do not feel it is my place to pass judgment on the morals of my guests. Anyway, we never saw the child again, and we made sure the room was completely sanitary for our next guests. Believe me, we have received nothing but good comments on our facilities. We think they are excellent and hope you agree, and I also hope you will be our guest again the next time you come to Florida.”

Unfortunately, the next time I came to Florida was for my sister’s funeral late that winter. I know now, as I did not know then, that she had been in ill health for most of the previous year, but I cannot help thinking that the so-called “incidents”—the senseless acts of vandalism directed against lone women in the South Florida area, culminating in several reported attacks by an unidentified prowler—may have hastened her death.

When I arrived here with Ellen to take care of my sister’s affairs and arrange for the funeral, I intended to remain a week or two at most, seeing to the transfer of the property. Yet somehow I lingered, long after Ellen had gone. Perhaps it was the thought of that New York winter, grown harsher

with each passing year; I just couldn't find the strength to go back. Nor, in the end, could I bring myself to sell this house; if I am trapped here, it's a trap I'm resigned to. Besides, moving has never much agreed with me; when I grow tired of this little room—and I do—I can think of nowhere else to go. I've seen all the world I want to see. This simple place is now my home—and I feel certain it will be my last. The calendar on the wall tells me it's been almost three months since I moved in. I know that somewhere in its remaining pages you will find the date of my death.

The past week has seen a new outbreak of the "incidents." Last night's was the most dramatic by far. I can recite it almost word for word from the morning news. Shortly before midnight Mrs. Florence Cavanaugh, a housewife living at 24 Alyssum Terrace, South Princeton, was about to close the curtains in her front room when she saw, peering through the window at her, what she described as "a large Negro man wearing a gas mask or scuba outfit." Mrs. Cavanaugh, who was dressed only in her nightgown, fell back from the window and screamed for her husband, asleep in the next room, but by the time he arrived the Negro had made good his escape.

Local police favor the "scuba" theory, since near the window they've discovered footprints that may have been made by a heavy man in swim fins. But they haven't been able to explain why anyone would wear underwater gear so many miles from water.

The report usually concludes with the news that "Mr. and Mrs. Cavanaugh could not be reached for comment."

The reason I have taken such an interest in the case—sufficient, anyway, to memorize the above details—is that I know the Cavanaughs rather well. They are my next-door neighbors.

Call it an aging writer's ego, if you like, but somehow I can't help thinking that last evening's visit was meant for me. These little green bungalows all look alike in the dark.

Well, there's still a little night left outside—time enough to rectify the error. I'm not going anywhere.

I think, in fact, it will be a rather appropriate end for a man of my pursuits —to be absorbed into the denouement of another man's tale.

Grow old along with me;

The best is yet to come.

Tell me, Howard: how long before it's my turn to see the black face pressed to my window?

Well-Connected

His first mistake, Philip later realized, had been in choosing a room without a bath. Years before, honeymooning in England while still on a junior law clerk's salary, he and his first wife had had great luck with such rooms, readily agreeing to "a bathroom down the hall" whenever the option was offered; they'd gotten unusual bargains that way, often finding themselves in the oldest, largest, and most charming room in the hotel for a third less than other guests were paying. Now, even though saving money was no longer an issue, some youthful habit had made him ask for just such a room, here in this rambling New England guesthouse. Or maybe his choice had been meant as a kind of test, one that might help determine if the young woman he'd brought with him this weekend was too intent on a luxury-class ride with him, or if she was the sort of person who remained un-fazed by life's small inconveniences — the sort who might become, in the end, his second wife.

This time, however, it seemed he had guessed wrong; for here at The Birches, the rooms without a bath faced the front lawn, still pitted from last winter's snows, a smooth expanse of newly tarred road that ended in a parking lot behind a line of shrubs, and a large, rather charmless white sign declaring VACANCY and SINCE 1810, beside which stood the woebegone little clump of birch trees that, presumably, had given the place its name; while it was the bigger, more expensive rooms just across the hall that looked out upon the wooded slopes of Romney Mountain, rising like a massive green wall somewhere beyond the back garden. Disappointingly, too, while their room boasted such amenities as genuine oak beams and a working fireplace, it had no telephone, at a time when, with young Tony precariously installed at a private school near Hanover less than thirty miles away, he'd have liked one handy. He envied whichever guest was staying in the room opposite theirs; when he and Margaret had passed it last night as they'd brought their bags upstairs, they'd heard its unseen occupant talking animatedly on the phone, embroiled in some urgent conversation.

It was the off-season, too late for even the most dedicated of skiers, too early for the annual onslaught of hikers, and the inn, from all appearances,

was barely half full. It would have been a simple thing to request a different room. Still, some perverse sense of obligation to his youthful self kept Philip from speaking up. He had made his choice, and, vacancies or not, he was not about to pack up and move elsewhere. Anyway, it was only for two more nights.

Today was Friday, the first Friday all year that he'd taken off, though when he'd quit the firm last summer to set up his own practice, he'd vowed there'd be many such weekends. Maybe now, with Margaret, there would be. The two of them had driven from Boston last night, speeding up Route 93 past the brightly lit ring roads curving round the city like lines of defense, through the lowlands of southeastern New Hampshire, and finally, long after darkness had fallen, past the dim shapes of starlit hills and a range of distant mountains, Sunapee and the Monad-nocks looming far to the southwest. Their destination lay twelve miles off the highway, down a series of roads of ever-diminishing width, in a part of the state more settled a century ago than it was today, when men no longer worked the land and once-prosperous farms had been reclaimed by forest. The region around Romney Mountain, with its caves and scenic gorges, had known even grander days, having seen, in the century's opening decades, the construction of at least two lavish hotels; a scattering of summer homes for the well-to-do of Boston; and, it was said, even one clandestine casino. The hotels and casino were long gone, and only recently had the effects of the postwar real estate boom been felt here. The glistening black road that wound through the valley to The Birches had been dirt less than a year ago.

They had spent most of the morning in the king-size fourposter that dominated their little room, snuggled under a patchwork quilt that made up in atmosphere what it lacked in warmth, and didn't come down to the dining room till long after the tables had been cleared. Fortunately the proprietress, Mrs. Hartley, still had enough Westchester in her soul to sympathize with late risers; and she'd kept a pot of coffee warm for them, along with extra helpings of that morning's blueberry pancakes. She and her husband had purchased The Birches only last spring; before that her only connection to ho-telkeeping had been as a part-time pastry chef, and his as a salesman of advertising space to an occasional resort. It was obvious from the look of the place that, with more zeal than knowledge, the Hartleys were trying to

restore the inn to something approximating its original appearance, or, failing that, to something approximating a house out of Currier and Ives — a row of whose prints, in matched maple frames, decorated the dining room wall.

While Margaret slipped back upstairs to change, Philip checked the time; Tony would already be finished with his morning classes. In the alcove off the bar he found an old-fashioned wall phone and, through the unit in the office, obtained an outside line. He dialed Tony's school.

Summoned from lunch, the boy sounded distracted. "I didn't think you'd call until tomorrow," he said, breathless as if from running. "Braddon's giving us a multiple-choice quiz in half an hour, and then I've got to try out for the play."

Philip wished him good luck, pleased that the boy was keeping so busy, and asked what time tomorrow would be best to visit. Spending a day with his son was the primary purpose of his trip; relations between them had been strained these past years.

"Is somebody coming with you?" asked Tony warily.

"You know very well I'm here with Margaret," said Philip. "I thought I explained all that in my letter." He immediately regretted the impatience in his voice. "Look, son, if you'd rather I came alone, I'm sure she can find something to do for an hour or two."

"Tomorrow's no good anyway," said Tony, having maneuvered his father into this concession. "We're supposed to have a track meet with Cobb Hill, and it's away. They told us last week, but I forgot." He added, apologetically, "They'll really be mad if I miss it. I'm one of the two best in the relay."

"How would Sunday be then?" asked Philip. "I'd have to leave by three."

"Sunday'd be great. You could take me into Hanover for a decent meal. And Dad . . ."

Philip waited. "Yes?"

"Do you think you'd have time to tell me a story?"

Philip felt an unexpected rush of affection so strong it embarrassed him. "Of course," he said. "I'll always have time for that." It had been years since Tony had asked for a story; once it had been their favorite pastime.

The day passed quickly. It was too cold for swimming — the new semicircular pool at the end of the garden stood empty, in fact — but Margaret, it turned out, was a nature enthusiast, and one thing The Birches had aplenty was nature trails. It was all Philip could do to keep up with her. Still, this Girl Scout aspect appealed to him; till now he'd only seen Margaret's urban side, the tall, studious-looking girl he'd secretly lusted after at his former office, and who'd seemed far too smart for the routine secretarial tasks required of her. Clutching glossy new guidebooks provided by the Hartleys, the two of them trudged along the base of the mountain, dutifully peering at fungi in their various disquieting shapes, admiring the newly blooming wildflow-ers, and searching — in vain, as it turned out — for identifiable animal tracks, all the while snacking on the sausage, bread, and cheese which Mrs. Hartley had packed for them. They discovered, nonetheless, that by dinner time their appetites were quite unimpaired; they shared a bottle of cabernet with their meal, chosen from the inn's small but adequate wine list, and still found room for dessert. Glowing rosily, as much from the wine as from the bay-berry candles that flickered at each table, they staggered into the lounge.

The room, high-ceilinged and handsome, was already occupied by several guests, who themselves were occupied over after-dinner drinks and conversation. Flames danced and sizzled in the obligatory fieldstone fireplace covering most of one wall. Before it, taking up more than his share of a bench by the fire, sat a large, barrel-shaped man, his bald head gleaming in the firelight, eyes sunken in wrinkles like an elephant's. He was wearing loose-fitting white pants and a somewhat threadbare cardigan. They had seen him in the other room, devouring Mrs. Hartley's rack of lamb with considerable gusto. Aside from one wizened old lady who, from her own table, had stared at him throughout the meal with apparent fascination, he was the only guest who'd dined alone. It was impossible to tell his age.

"Am I blocking you from the fire?" he asked. He flashed a smile at Margaret. "Here, you young people, have a seat. April nights are chilly in this part of the world." There was a trace of accent in his voice, a hint of Old World frost-fires and battlements. He eased himself sideways and patted the bench beside him. Margaret politely sat; Philip, with no room for himself, pulled up a wooden chair.

"I trust that you two are enjoying your stay." He spoke as one who expected an answer.

"So far," said Philip. "Actually, we came up to visit my son. He's at prep school a bit north of here."

"And, of course, to relax," Margaret added.

"Of course!" The man grinned again. His teeth were long and widely spaced, like tree roots blanched by water. "And have you found your relaxation?"

Philip nodded. "Of a sort. Today we took a hike around the base of the mountain, and tomorrow we may go for a drive, maybe look for some antiques."

"Ah, a fellow antique-lover!" He turned to Margaret. "And you?"

"I'm more of a swimmer myself. Unfortunately, this isn't the weather for it."

The other cocked his head and seemed to study her a moment. "Odd you should say that, because I happen to know where there's an excellent heated pool not half an hour's stroll from here. All indoors, with antique brass steps in each corner and a well-stocked bar right beside it, so close you can reach for your wine while standing in the water. The bar stools are covered in leather from, if the lady will pardon me —" He regarded her almost coyly for a moment. "— the testicles of a sperm whale." Philip and Margaret exchanged a wary glance, then a smile. "It's true," the older man was saying, "I assure you! No expense was spared. The pool has its own underground oil tank which keeps it at exactly seventy degrees. You'll find a

painting of Bacchus on the ceiling, best appreciated while floating on your back, and heart-shaped tiles on the floor shipped specially from Florence."

"I've never heard of such a place," said Philip. "There's certainly nothing like it listed in the guidebooks."

"Oh, you won't find it in a guidebook, my friend. It isn't open to the public." His voice was low, conspiratorial. "It's in the private home of a certain Mr. Hagendorn, on the other side of the mountain."

"Sounds like he must be worth a fortune."

The other shrugged. "You've heard of the Great Northern Railroad? One of Mr. Hagendorn's ancestors owned nine million shares. So as you might imagine, Mr. Hagendorn has always been accustomed to getting what he wants. The bed he sleeps in once belonged to an Italian prince, and the house itself is modeled on a Tuscan villa. It has its own greenhouse, a billiard room with six imported stained glass windows, and a sun porch with a magnificient view of the gorge."

"You seem to know the place pretty well," said Philip.

A shadow crossed the other's face. "I used to live there," he said softly.

"You mean you once owned it?"

"No, not at all. I merely worked there. I was young when I started, and new to this area, but by the time I was twenty I was Mr. Hagendorn's personal aide. Wine for the cellar, an antique painting, a new maid — whatever he required, I obtained. I served him well for many years, and we remain in close touch. He asks me often to his home. I'm always welcome there." He sighed. "So while I'm not a rich man, I suppose you'd have to say I'm well-connected."

"It sounds," said Margaret, "like a fabulous place."

The old man brightened. "Would you care to see it? I'm sure Mr. Hagendorn would love to have you as his guests. You could come for a swim, say

tomorrow afternoon. Stay for an early dinner, and I'd have you back here just after dark. I know the trail by heart." Leaning toward them as if afraid the other guests would hear, he added, "You've never had dinner till you've had it in the great hall, overlooking the valley. The new people who've taken over this place —" His hand swept the room. "— they cook a meal fit for a peasant like me. But Mr. Hagendorn has employed the finest chefs in Europe."

"But why," said Philip, "would this fellow want to put himself out for two complete strangers?"

"The truth is, my friend, he's somewhat lonely. He doesn't get many visitors these days, and I know he'd want to make the acquaintance of two young people like you."

"But we didn't bring bathing suits," said Philip, hoping, somehow, that the matter might rest there.

"Speak for yourself," said Margaret brightly. "I brought mine."

The man turned to Philip with what looked disconcertingly like a wink, but it may just have been smoke in his eyes. "I assure you Mr. Hagendorn has plenty — for men, omen, boys, girls. Though you may find them a little out of style!"

Margaret clasped her hands. "Oh, I love old-fashioned things. It sounds like fun." She turned to Philip. "Can we go, honey?"

He swallowed. "Well, I still don't like just barging in on the man. I mean, what if he's not in the mood for visitors?"

The older man stood, a surprisingly rapid movement for one so large and so seemingly advanced in years. "No need to worry," he said. "I'll simply ask him. I'll be speaking with him tonight anyway." Excusing himself with a courtly bow, he made his way from the room, picking his way among the other guests.

It was only after he'd left that Philip realized they had failed to exchange names, and that their entire conversation had been watched — with, it appeared, an almost indecent curiosity — by the wizened old lady of the dining room, who now sat regarding him and Margaret from the depths of a wing-back chair in the corner, dark eyes glittering.

"Maybe she's just got a crush on him," said Margaret later, as they moved about the little room preparing for bed. "He looks like he's nearly as old as she is, and men that age are scarce."

"I'll bet that by tomorrow he changes his mind about the pool," said Philip, with a curious feeling of hope. "I'll bet he was talking through his hat about how chummy he is with his boss. He probably won't even bother to phone the guy."

But shortly afterward, when Margaret returned from the bathroom at the end of the hall, she closed the door behind her and whispered, "You're wrong, honey. He's telling him about us right now — about how he met us in the lounge tonight."

"How do you know?"

"I heard him," said Margaret. "He has the room across from us."

Gathering his toothbrush and towel, Philip stepped gingerly into the hall. Sure enough, he could hear a man's low voice coming from the room opposite theirs, and recognized it now as belonging to their companion from the lounge. Still half turned toward the bathroom as if that innocent goal were all he had in mind, he tiptoed closer.

"Yes, they're both coming . . . What's that?" There was a pause. "No, not at all. They both seem quite well-bred. . . . Yes, she's charming. You're going to like her." Another pause. "It's agreed, then. Tomorrow, by three."

A door rattled somewhere down the hall. Philip whirled and hurried to the bathroom. By the time he emerged, the hall was silent. He thought he could hear, faintly, a snoring from the old man's room.

Margaret was already in bed when he returned. She looked up expectantly. "So? Hear anything?"

He planted a kiss on her lips. "He says you're charming."

She laughed and pulled him down beside her. "How in the world did he find out?"

Later, as they lay beside one another in the darkness, she stirred and said sleepily, "I hope I don't dream again tonight."

"Had a bad one last night? You didn't tell me."

"I can't remember it." She pressed her face deeper into the pillow. "All I know is, it was scary. Leave your arm around me, will you?"

"It'll fall asleep in three minutes."

"Leave it around me for three minutes."

He himself was asleep in less than that. Some time later — it must have been near dawn, for beyond the lace curtains the sky had grown pale — he felt himself awakened by a tugging at his arm, and heard Margaret whisper his name.

"Whatsamatter?" he mumbled.

"Is it really you?"

The idiocy of her question seemed, to his sleep-befogged brain, too enormous to contemplate. "Yes," he said, "it is." In a moment he was once again asleep.

"I got frightened," she explained the next morning, sunlight flooding the room. "I somehow got it into my head that there was someone else in bed with us."

"You mean, like threezies?"

"Like another man lying between us, pressing up against us both. And you know, I think he was black — a little black man."

"Maybe it was that guy from the mailroom."

She seemed not to hear. "What's so weird is, I'm sure it's the same dream I had the night before."

Philip yawned and rubbed his eyes. "Well, you know what they say about dreams. Wish-fulfillment."

She poked him in the ribs. "Honestly, Philip, you're so trite!" Frowning, she looked about the room — the cloud pattern in the wallpaper, a spiderlike crack in the ceiling, a row of dark pines in the painting above the dresser. "You don't suppose this place is haunted, do you?"

"Talk about trite . .."

"I mean," she went on, "inns have been known to be haunted."

"Sure," he said, "they all are. Or claim to be. The ghost of some long-lost sea captain comes back every hundred and twelve years, or a serving wench who hanged herself appears at each full moon. Here it's probably Daniel Webster's brother-in-law. All part of the charm."

"Just the same, will you ask the Hartleys? Ask them if there's a ghost."

"Why don't you?"

"I'm too embarrassed."

Embarrassed himself, Philip asked Mr. Hartley in the office downstairs while Margaret finished getting dressed.

"No ghosts that I know of," the man said, scratching his thinning hair. Suddenly he grinned. "But golly, I sure would like to have one. It'd help business."

Their stout companion was waiting for them in the lounge by the time they had finished breakfast. "It's all agreed," he said genially. "Mr. Hagendorn would love to meet you both."

"It certainly looks like a beautiful day," said Margaret.

He nodded, beaming. "Magnificent. You'll be able to see clear to the Monadnocks." He seemed, on this sunny morning, the soul of jollity. "By the way, I didn't introduce myself last night. My name is Laszlo." His grip was like iron as they shook hands and arranged to leave after lunch.

When lunchtime arrived, however, a call came for Philip on the phone by the bar. "Sorry, Dad," said Tony, with a babble of youthful voices in the background. "I got it wrong. The track meet's tomorrow. Can you come see me today?"

"Hell," said Philip, "we've already made plans. I can't just —" He caught himself. "Yeah, sure, I guess. No problem. What time's good?"

"That's just it. I don't know yet. Jimmy and I are getting a lift into town, and we need you to pick us up." There followed a dismayingly complicated series of adolescent proposals and provisos, the upshot of which was that Philip was to wait for Tony's call "sometime in the early afternoon," whereupon further directions would be supplied.

Dinner with the reclusive Mr. Hag-endorn was clearly out of the question. Laszlo, waiting for them at the bottom of the garden where the trail began, agreed to take Margaret up to the villa for a swim alone, and promised he would have her back by nightfall, in time for Philip's return. Far from being put out, he seemed to take the last-minute change of plans with surprising nonchalance.

"Mr. Hagendorn will of course be disappointed," he said. "He told me how much he looked forward to meeting you both. But at least I am bringing the young lady."

He was dressed in the same loose-fitting white pants, like some ancient man of medicine — they even had a drawstring, Philip noticed — but he'd

added, over his white shirt, a warm alpine jacket, and his bald head was covered by an old-fashioned homburg. Far from being unfit for a protracted uphill walk, he looked younger and more powerful than he had by the fireside last night. It was clear he belonged on the mountain.

Margaret carried her bathing suit wrapped in a towel. A camera dangled from a strap around her neck. "I'll bet the view's wonderful from up there," she said, kissing Philip goodbye. She blew him a second goodbye kiss as she and her companion started gaily up the trail.

The air had grown chillier as they climbed, but their exertions kept them warm. The walk was proving more arduous than Margaret had expected. "How in the world did your boss ever manage to build a house up here?" she had asked half an hour ago, as they'd pushed their way up a steep section of path near the foot of the mountain.

"There's a narrow road that winds around the other side," Laszlo had said, pausing to tilt back his hat and wipe the sweat from his bald head. "We're going up the back way. You'll find, however, that it's faster."

He had sounded friendly enough, but since then they'd exchanged barely a word. As the day had grown colder, so had his mood; he'd become silent, preoccupied, as if listening for voices from the mountain, and when she'd asked him how much farther it was, he'd simply nodded toward the north and said, "Soon."

They had been on the trail for nearly an hour, following a zigzag course up the densely wooded slope. It was plain that Laszlo had misled her — or perhaps he had misled himself as well: though he continued, even now, to walk steadily and purposefully, with no sign of hesitation, she was beginning to wonder if he really knew the way as well as he'd claimed.

By the time the trail grew level, the trees had begun to thin out, and when she turned to look behind her she could see, in the spaces between them, the distance they had come. Below them spread the undulating green of the valley, though the inn and its grounds were lost from sight around the other side of the mountain. They were midway up the slope now, following a circular route toward the northern face. Ahead of her Laszlo paused, staring

uphill past a faraway outcropping of rocks, and said, "We're nearly there. It's just past that curve of land."

Shielding her eyes, she searched the horizon for a glimpse of rooftops. Suddenly she squinted. "Who's that?"

"Where?"

"Up among those rocks." She pointed, then felt foolish; for a second she'd thought she'd seen a small black figure merge with the shadow of a boulder as it fell upon the uneven ground. But now, as she looked more closely, she could see that the ground lay covered in ragged clumps of undergrowth, and that it was this, tossed by the wind, that had moved.

"Come," said Laszlo, "the house is just ahead, and we will want to be back down before dark."

Philip sat impatiently on the back porch, leafing through one of the previous winter's ski magazines while waiting for the phone inside to ring. The potted geraniums blew softly in the breeze from off the mountain. He found it absurdly unnecessary to keep assuring himself that Margaret would be all right with Laszlo, but he continued to assure himself of that just the same.

He looked up to find himself no longer alone. The elderly woman from last night had seated herself in a chair nearby and had taken out some knitting. She nodded to him. "First time here?"

"Yes," he said, automatically raising his voice on the assumption that she might be hard of hearing. "Just a weekend vacation."

"I've been coming here for more than fifty years," she said. "My husband and I first came here in the summer of 1935. He passed on in '64, but I keep coming back. I've seen this inn change hands seven times." She gave a little cackle. "Seven times!"

Philip laid aside the magazine. "And does the place look different now?" he asked politely.

"The inn, no. The area is different. There've been a lot of new people coming in, and a lot of the old ones gone." She looked as if she were about to enumerate them, but at that moment the screen door opened and Mrs. Hartley emerged, an account book in her hand. She saw Philip and smiled.

"Still waiting for your call?"

"Yes," he said. "I don't know what's keeping that kid. I'll hear the phone out here, won't I?"

"Sure, but somebody's on it now, and it looks like they may take a while. I'll try to hurry 'em up."

Philip frowned. "How about the phone in the office?"

"Well, my husband's using it right now. He's going over the orders with our supplier down in Concord. But don't worry, it won't take long."

"The problem is," said Philip, with growing impatience, "my son may be trying to reach me at this very moment. Couldn't you transfer his call to a phone upstairs? I could wait in one of the vacant rooms."

She shook her head. "There aren't any phones up there. The two down here are the only ones we've got."

"But that's impossible," said Philip. He could feel his heart beginning to beat faster. "Impossible! That big fellow, Laszlo, has a phone in his room. I heard him just last night, and the night before. He was talking with someone named Hagendorn. I heard him." Yet even as the words rushed from his lips, he knew that what he'd said was false; that it was not impossible at all; that the only voice he'd heard had been Laszlo's. For all he knew, the man might have been speaking to the walls, the air, the empty room.

They had a word for people like that, people who talked to themselves. Psychos.

"That's where I know him from!" the old woman was saying. "He was Hagendorn's man. I knew I recognized him." She turned to Philip. "The person

you were talking to last night, he used to be a kind of— oh, I don't know what you'd call him. A kind of valet. He worked for some dreadful man who lived up on the mountain. Bringing women up there for him, and I don't know what else. There were all kinds of stories."

"That's right," said Philip, eagerly grasping at any confirmation of the facts, however unsavory. "This guy Hagendorn. He's apparently got some sort of opulent villa up there."

The woman's eyes widened. "But that house burned down in 1939. I remember it — some kind of terrible explosion. Something to do with an oil tank. That man Hagendorn was burned to death, I remember distinctly, and everyone said it was just as well." She shook her head. "There's nothing up there now. There hasn't been a house there for years."

"Honestly, Laszlo," called Margaret, "are you sure we haven't come too far? This can't be the way."

They had passed the outcropping of rocks and had wandered out onto a narrow tableland overgrown by scrub pine and weeds. Ahead of them, curving against the mountain's face, stood what looked like a low broken-down stone wall half concealed by vegetation. Beyond it the pines appeared to be anchored in nothing but blue sky, for at their base the land dropped away into a haphazard tumble of boulders a thousand feet below, as if giant hands had sheared away part of the mountain.

Laszlo was well in front of her, his pace here grown more eager, while she, fearful of the drop, walked slowly now, eyes wary. With an impatient wave of his hand he motioned for her to join him.

"Laszlo," she said breathlessly, as she caught up with him, "where are we? Where is Mr. Hagendorn's house?"

"What's that? The house?" He pursed his lips and looked blank for a moment. Absently he gazed around him, like one seeing this place for the first time. Suddenly his gaze grew fixed; she noticed that he was staring past her feet. "Why, here's the house," he said in a small voice, as if explaining to a child. "It's right here."

She followed his gaze. He was pointing directly into the gorge.

She stepped back in confusion. He's only joking, she told herself, but her stomach refused to believe her. She felt his hand fall lightly on her shoulder.

"I suppose," he said, "that first you'll want to see the pool."

"Oh, yes," she said, trying vainly to twist away. "Yes, show me the pool, Laszlo."

For a moment his arm dropped from her shoulder and she was free; but already he had seized her hand and was dragging her implacably forward.

"Come," he said. "There's so much to see." Smiling, he gestured at what lay before them, a vast cavity in the rock, deep as a pit, cut sharply as the lip of a monstrous pitcher into the precipice's edge. Laszlo tugged her closer. With a gasp she realized that its three stony sides were squared off, as regular as the walls of some enormous dungeon, but cracked and weathered now, patch-worked with lichen and moss — ancient. The bottom was a mass of weed-grown rubble opening onto the sky.

"And here," he said, "we have the pool."

Her wrist ached as he urged her to its brink. The ground seemed to shift beneath her as an edge of cloud swept past the sun. She took an unsteady step backward.

"No," he said in a chiding voice, "you can't leave now. You'll have to stay the night."

Drawn forward, she peered into the shadowy depths. Within them, as the light changed, something stirred, black as soot, like a stick of charred wood.

"The tiles are imported," he was saying. "No expense was spared."

She felt his free hand close tightly on her shoulder. The ground was spinning beneath her feet, the shadows rising to claim her.

"And now," he said, "it is time to meet Mr. Hagendorn."

Neither of the Hartleys had been of any help, beyond locating, in one of their local guidebooks, a map of the hiking trails that crisscrossed the mountain; but the old lady, lips quivering with concentration, had been able to make an educated guess where the villa had stood, just above a jagged grey line identified on the map as Romney Gorge. Judging by the map, it seemed, despite Laszlo's claim, the climb of at least an hour; but Philip made it in half that — in time to see a burly figure in hospital whites struggling with a young woman at the top of the trail, by the edge of a cleft cut deep into the rock and opening onto the sky.

He raced toward them with what little strength remained, knowing that, days later and far away, he'd be able to tell his son the story of how one of the pair was snatched back from the abyss, while the other went to meet his master alone.

Growing Things

“Hey, honey, listen to this one. It’s downright scary.”

The magazine, drawn from near the middle of the pile, was yellowed, musty-smelling. Herb licked his lips with a fat tongue and squinted at the page with the corner turned down. “ ‘Dear Mr. Fixit: Early this spring a peculiar roundish bulge appeared under the linoleum in my bathroom, and now with the warm weather it’s beginning to get larger, as if something is sprouting under there. My husband, who is not well, almost tripped over it yesterday. What is it, some sort of fungus? How can I get rid of it without having to rip up the linoleum? As we cannot afford expensive new flooring, we are relying on you.’ Signed, ‘Anxious.’ ”

“I shouldn’t wonder she was anxious,” said Iris from her cloud of lemon oil and beeswax. She’d been giving the old end table a vigorous polishing and was slightly out of breath. “Who wants to share their bathroom with a bunch of toadstools?”

“Don’t worry, Fixit’s got it under control. ‘Dear Anxious: Sounds as if you have a pocket of moisture trapped between the floorboards and the linoleum. Often a damp basement is the culprit. Simply drill a hole up from the basement to release the moisture buildup, then seal the area with flash patch or creosote.’ “ Herb rubbed his chin. “Sounds simple enough to me.”

“Not in this house.”

“What do you mean?”

“We don’t have a basement, remember? You’d have to get down on your belly and slither beneath the house, with all that muck down there.”

“Hah, you’re right! Certainly wouldn’t want to do that!” Herb’s stomach shook as he laughed. “Thank God the damned bathroom’s new.”

In fact, the bathroom, clean and professionally tiled, was one of the things that had sold them on the house. Herb liked long showers, and Iris—who,

unlike Herb's first wife, had never had to make time for children—was given to leisurely soaks in the tub.

The rest of the place was in, at best, an indifferent state of repair. The rain gutters sagged, the windows needed caulking, and, if the house were to serve as anything more than a summer retreat from the city, the ancient coal-burning furnace in an alcove behind the kitchen would have to be replaced. Eventually, too, they'd have to add more rooms; at present the house was just a bungalow, a single floor of living space crowned by a not-too-well-insulated attic littered with rolls of cotton wadding, damaged furniture, and other bric-a-brac abandoned by the former owners. Who these owners were was uncertain; clearly the place hadn't been lived in for years, and—though the real estate lady had denied it—it had probably been on the market for most of that time.

The two of them, of course, had hoped for something better; they were, in their way, a pair of midlife romantics. But Herb's alimony payments and an unexpected drubbing from the IRS this April had forced them to be practical. Besides, they had three acres' worth of woods, and stars they could never have seen from the city, and bullfrogs chanting feverishly in the marsh behind the house. They had an old woodshed, a swaybacked garage that had once been a barn, and a sunken area near the forest's edge, overgrown with mushrooms and moss, that the real estate lady assured them had been a garden. They had each other. Did the house itself need work? As Herb had said airily when a skeptical friend asked if he knew anything about home repair, "Well, I know how to write a check."

Secretly he nourished the ambition of doing the work himself. Though he had barely picked up a hammer since he'd knocked together bookends for his parents in a high school shop class, he felt certain that a few carefully selected repair manuals and a short course of This Old House would see him through. If fate had steered him and Iris toward that creature of jest, the "handyman special," well, so be it. He would simply learn to be a handyman.

And fate, for once, had seemed to agree; for, among the artifacts left by the previous owners was a bookshelf stacked high with old magazines.

Actually, not all that old—from the late 1970s, in fact—but the humidity had aged them, so that they had taken on the fragile, jaundiced look of magazines from decades earlier. Iris had wanted to throw them away —"Those moldy old things," she'd said, curling her hp, "they smell of mildew. We'll fill up the shelves with books from local yard sales"—but Herb refused to hear of it. "They're perfect for a country house," he had said. "I mean, just look at this. Home Handyman. Practical Gardener. Growing Things Organically. Modem Health. Perfect rainy day reading."

Luckily for Herb, there were lots of rainy days in this part of the world, because after three months of homeowning it had become clear that reading do-it-yourself columns such as "Mr. Fixit"—a regular feature in Home Handyman magazine—was a good deal more fun than actually fixing anything. He'd enjoyed shopping for tools and had turned a corner of the garage into a rudimentary workshop; but now that the tools gleamed from their hooks on the wall and the necessary work space had been cleared, his enthusiasm had waned.

In fact, a certain lassitude had settled upon them both. Maybe it was the dampness. This was, by all accounts, one of the wettest summers on record; each week the local pennysaver sagged in their hands as they pulled it from the mailbox, and a book of stamps that Iris bought had long since stuck together. Dollars had grown limp in Herb's wallet. Today, with the summer sky once more threatening storms, he lay aside the Handyman and spent the afternoon with his nose buried in a back issue of Country Kitchen, while Iris, unable to transform an end table from the attic into something that passed for an antique, put away her beeswax and retreated to the bedroom for a nap.

It was growing dark by the time she awoke. Clouds covered the sky, but the rain had not come. Despite the afternoon's inactivity, they were both too tired to cook; instead they had dinner by candlelight at a roadside inn, along a desolate stretch of highway several miles beyond the town. They toasted one another's health and wished that they were just a few years younger.

The house felt chilly when they returned; the air seemed thick with moisture. They'd already had to buy themselves wool mattress pads to keep their sheets from growing clammy. Tonight, to take the dampness off, Herb

built a fire, carefully examining the logs he carried inside for spiders and insects that could drop off and infest the house. He remembered a line he'd seen in Practical Gardener, something about being constantly on watch for "the blight on the peach and the worm in the rosebud."

This evening, though, it was Home Handyman that drew him back. He'd started weeks before with the older issues at the bottom of the pile and had steadily been working his way up. While on the couch Iris yawned over a contemporary romance, he engrossed himself in articles on wood-stove safety, building a patio, and—something he was glad he'd never have to worry about—pumping out a flooded basement.

The issue he'd just pulled out, from the top half of the pile, was less yellowed than the ones before. "Here's a letter," he announced, "from a man who's had trouble removing a tree stump next to his house. Mr. Fixit says he'd better get rid of it fast, or it'll attract termites." Herb shook his head. "Christ, you can't let down your guard for a second out here. And here's one from a man who built a chimney but didn't seal it properly." He chuckled. "The damn fool! Filled his attic with smoke." He eyed their fireplace speculatively, but it looked solid and substantial, the flames merry. He turned back to the magazine. The next page had the corner folded down. "Some guy asks about oil stains on a concrete floor. Mr. Fixit recommends a mixture of cream of tartar and something called 'oxalic acid.' How the hell are you supposed to find … Hey, listen to this, here's another one from that same woman who wrote in before. 'Dear Mr. Fixit: The advice you gave me previously, on getting rid of bulges under the linoleum in my bathroom by drilling up from the basement, was of little use, as we have no basement, and due to an incapacity my husband and I are unable to make our way beneath the house. The bulges—' "

Iris looked up from her book. "Before it was just one bulge."

"Well, hon," he said, thinking of her in the tub, "you know how it is with bulges." He made sure he saw her smile before turning back to the column. " The bulges have grown larger, and there's a definite odor coming from them. What should we do?' Signed, 'Still Anxious.' "

“That poor woman!” said Iris. She stretched and settled back into the cushions. “You don’t suppose it could be radon, do you?”

“No, he says they may have something called ‘wood bloat.’ “ Herb shuddered, savoring the phrase. “ ‘Forget about preserving the linoleum,’ he says. ‘Drill two holes deep into the center of the bulges and carefully pour in a solution of equal parts baking soda, mineral spirits, and vanilla extract. If that doesn’t do the trick, I’d advise you to seek professional help.’ ”

“She should have done that in the first place,” said Iris. “I’d love to know how she made out.”

“Me, too,” said Herb. “Let’s see if the story’s continued.”

He flipped through the next few months of Home Handyman. There were leaky stovepipes, backed-up drains, and decaying roofs, but no mention of the bulges. From the couch came a soft bump as Iris lay back and let the book drop to the rug. Her eyes closed; her mouth went slack. Watching her stomach rise and fall in the firelight, he felt suddenly and peculiarly alone.

From outside came the whisper of rain—normally a peaceful sound, but tonight a troubling one; he could picture the land around the house, and beneath it, becoming a place of marsh and stagnant water, where God knows what might grow. The important thing, he knew, was to keep the bottom of the house raised above the ground, or else dampness would rot the timbers. Surely the crawl space under his feet was ample protection from the wetness; still, he wished that the house had a basement.

Softly, so as not to wake his wife, he tiptoed into the bathroom—still smelling pleasantly of paint and varnish—and stared pensively at the floor. For a moment, alarmed, he thought he noticed a hairline crack between two of the new tiles, where the floor was slightly uneven between the toilet and the shower stall; but the light was bad in here, and the crack had probably been there all along.

By the time he returned to the front room, the fire was beginning to go out. He’d have liked to add more wood, but he didn’t want to risk waking Iris. Seating himself back on the rug with a pile of magazines beside him, he

continued his search through the remaining issues of Home Handyman, right up till the point, more than three years in the past, when the issues stopped. He found no further updates from "Anxious;" he wasn't sure whether he was disappointed or relieved. The latter, he supposed; things must have come out okay.

The issues of Handyman were replaced by a pile, only slightly less yellowed and slightly less substantial, of Modem Health, with, predictably, its own advice column, this one conducted by a "Dr. Carewell." Shingles on roots were succeeded by shingles on faces and legs; the cracked plaster and rotting baseboards gave way to hay fever and thinning hair.

"I have an enormous bunion on my right foot," one letter began, with a trace of pride. "I have a hernia that was left untreated," said another. Readers complained of plantar warts, aching backs, and coughs that wouldn't quit. It was like owning a home, Herb thought; you had to be constantly vigilant. Sooner or later, something always gave way and the rot seeped in. "Dear Dr. Carewell," one letter began, where the page corner had been turned down, "My husband and I are both increasingly incapacitated by a rash that has left large rose-red blotches all over our bodies. Could it be some sort of fungus? There is no pain or itching, but odd little bumps have begun to appear in the center." It was signed "Bedridden."

All this talk of breakdown and disease was depressing, and the mention of bed had made him tired. The fire had almost gone out. Glancing at the doctor's reply—it was cheerily reassuring, something about plenty of exercise and good organic vegetables—he got slowly to his feet. From another room came the creak of wood as the old house settled in for the night.

Iris snored softly on the couch. She looked so peaceful that he hated to wake her, but he knew she'd fall asleep again soon; the two of them always slept well, out here in the country. "Come on, hon," he whispered. "Bedtime." The sound of the rain no longer troubled him as he bent toward her, brushed back her hair, and tenderly planted a kiss on her cheek, rosy in the dying light.

Complete Short Stories

The Events at Poroth Farm (1972)

Renaissance Man (1974)

S.F. (1975)

~~Magic Carpet (1976)~~

Petey (1979)

Children of the Kingdom (1980)

Black Man with a Horn (1980)

~~Nadelman's God (1985)~~

Well-Connected (1987)

~~Camera Shy (1988)~~

~~They Don't Write 'em Like This Anymore: A TV Treatment in Two Versions (1989)~~

~~Ladder (1990)~~

~~One Size Eats All (1993)~~

~~Curtains for Nat Crumley (1996)~~

Growing Things (1999)

~~Imagining Things (2007)~~